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by

GILBERT COLLINS

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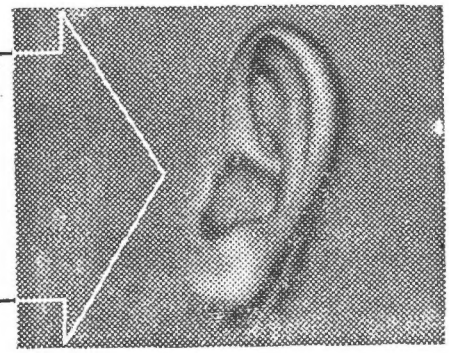

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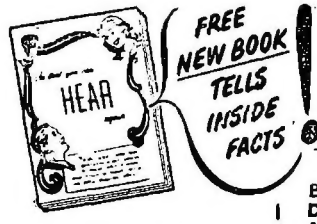

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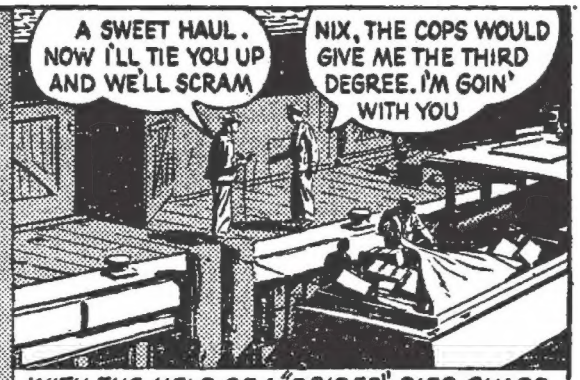

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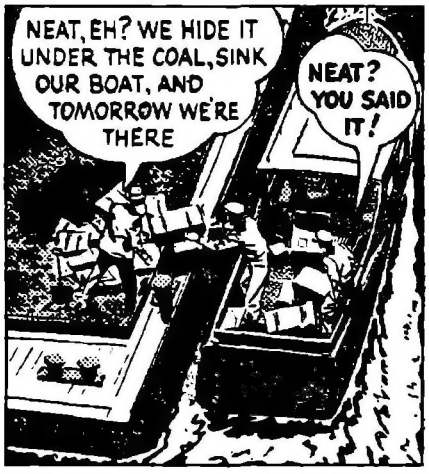

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Vol. 11 OCTOBER, 1949 No. 1

Book-Length Novel

The Starkenden Quest. **Gilbert Collins** **10**

A lovely lost girl, an all but hopeless clue, a forbidden land where mysterious gods brooded and unseen terror menaced. No stranger journey had mortal man ever taken than that haunted safari which lured Crayton to the brink of the Unknown—and beyond. . . .

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Cover by Lawrence. Inside illustrations by Finlay.

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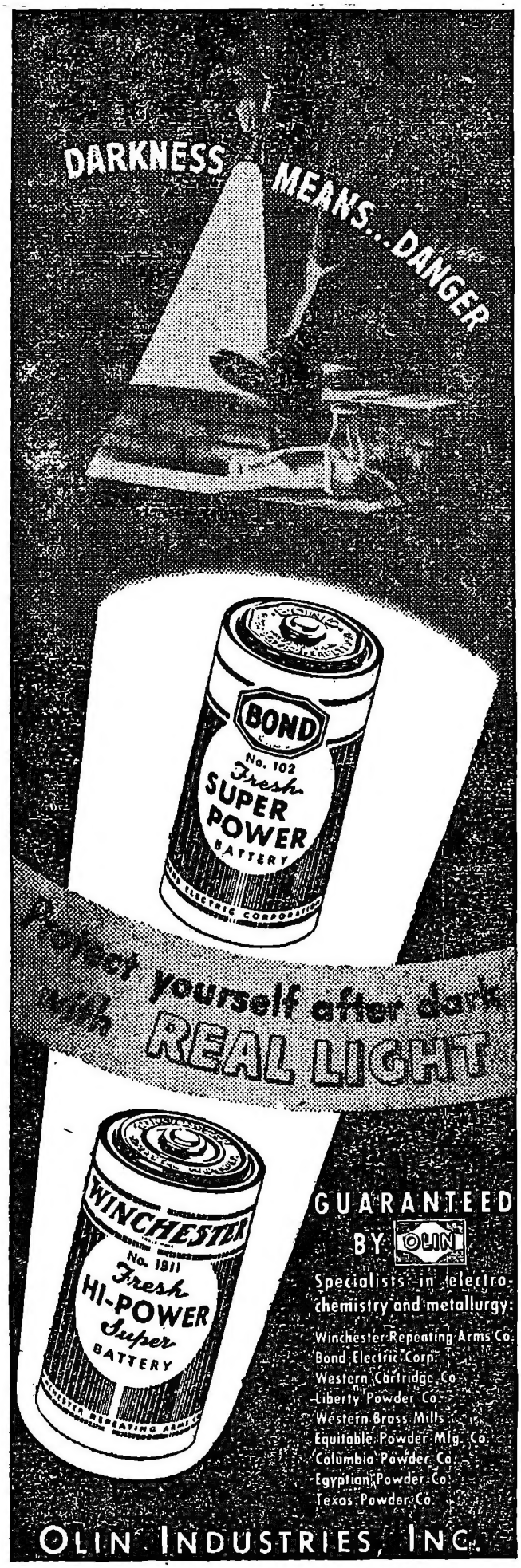

The Readers' Viewpoint

Address comments to the Letter Editor, Famous Fantastic Mysteries, All-Fiction Field, Inc., 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, New York.

The Editor Greets You

Dear Readers:

This issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* marks the magazine's tenth year of age. It began with the September-October issue in 1939 and it was in the summer of that year that we (helpful readers and I) began to dig through the Munsey files for the first material. This is really an exciting occasion for us! There is a great deal I could say but nothing more concise or well thought out or more gracefully phrased than the letter which one of our first readers has sent to me to commemorate the occasion from the reader's viewpoint. Mr. Ben Indick's letter was very satisfying to me, and I am sure you will all feel the same way that I did when you read it.

Mary Gnaedinger

Dear Mary Gnaedinger,

I had just finished a short card to you when I found myself getting mellow with the occasion! I had so many things to say that no card could suffice; and so, it simply had to be a letter. I noted that in the latest F.F.M., you mentioned the birthday of our favorite magazine, sort of jumping the gun on us! I had planned to write later, for September-October is the date. But, since congratulations are now in order, I tender mine!

It's really been a grand ten years. I recall when the mag was one thin year old. It had gone down to a dime in price. (And what an issue that was—"The Face in the Abyss" and "Fungus Isle"!) Now it is a decade old, and wears a bit of an air of dignity. As befits a magazine that presents Haggard, Chesterton, Hodgson and Shiel; but, fortunately, it does not forget the names that carried it through thin years—Merritt, Hall, England. Nor should it, for they are as proud a group as any!

F.F.M. was the first mag which I had the temerity to buy, new or used. I recall the very first I bought, the Nov. 1939 issue, one

(Continued on page 120)

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For Mystery—"The Big Steal" with Robert Mitchum, Jane Greer and William Bendix (RKO).

When a $300,000 Army payroll is stolen, Lt. Duke Halliday (Robert Mitchum) and Joan Grahame (Jane Greer) start across Mexico by car in pursuit of the thief. They, in turn, are pursued by Captain Vincent Blake (William Bendix) who has accused Duke of taking the money. As the chase progresses, the tension continues to mount until the swift, surprise ending. *The plot of the picture gets jumbled, but the thrill-a-minute pace will hold you in your seat.*

• • •

For Comedy-Romance—"The Lady Takes A Sailor" with Jane Wyman, Dennis Morgan, Eve Arden, Robert Douglas and Allyn Joslyn (Warner Bros.).

The lady (Jane Wyman) is president of a national research institute, impeccable, honest and engaged to a stuffy Harvard lawyer (Allyn Joslyn). People begin to doubt her integrity, however, when she returns from a sailboat trip and says that she has ridden with "Davey Jones" in a strange, underwater craft which was stalled by an octopus. Trying to straighten it out by proving that real-life Bill Craig (Dennis Morgan) was the mysterious "Davey" and that his craft was a new Navy underwater tank, is an hilarious task. *This is a daffy picture that will give you a full evening of laughter.*

• • •

For Drama—"The Great Gatsby" with Alan Ladd, Betty Field, MacDonald Carey, Ruth Hussey, Barry Sullivan, Howard Da Silva and Shelley Winters (Paramount).

Based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic about the roaring '20s, this film tells the tragic story of Jay Gatsby (Alan Ladd), who became a bootlegger because he thought money could buy everything—even a rich man's wife. In the course of the story, Gatsby tries to crash Long Island society but finds it as false in its way of life as he is in his. In the end, awake at last to his empty daydreams, Gatsby is murdered for a crime he didn't commit. *Spottily played, this film claims its chief interest as a portrait of a wild and dizzy by-gone era.*

• • •

For Adventure—"Slattery's Hurricane" with Richard Widmark, Linda Darnell, Veronica Lake and John Russell (20th Century-Fox).

Ex-Navy pilot, Will Slattery (Richard Widmark), now a chauffeur pilot for an importer, meets his wartime buddy, Felix Hobson (John Russell), who is hunting hurricanes for the Navy. He discovers that his one-time sweetheart, Aggie (Linda Darnell), is now Mrs. Hobson. The importer's secretary, Dolores (Veronica Lake), who is in love with Slattery, realizes that he is still interested in Aggie and disappears. While looking for Dolores and straightening out the situation between Aggie, Hobson and himself, Slattery finds that he is unwittingly involved in a narcotics smuggling ring. He finally makes amends by taking Hobson's place on a dangerous mission to locate a particularly vicious storm. *This is an exciting look into the lives of U. S. Navy hurricane hunters.*

• • •

For A Western—"Calamity Jane and Sam Bass" with Yvonne De Carlo and Howard Duff (Universal-International). Technicolor.

Sam Bass (Howard Duff) had never fired a gun before he came to Denton, Texas. He learns fast, though, when the town banker has his horse poisoned prior to the big race of the year. Turned outlaw to recover money from the banker which is rightfully his, Bass takes to the hills with the assistance of Calamity Jane (Yvonne De Carlo). Sam's true love, Kathy Egan, convinces Sam that he should give himself up. When it looks like the jury for his trial will be packed against him by the banker, Sam escapes again with Calamity Jane's help. There's a showdown battle and Sam is fatally wounded. When he asks to be taken to Kathy, Calamity Jane realizes that Sam Bass was never for her. *There's enough action, color and different twists to make this a show that Western fans will want to see.*

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In the midst of the blazing mass there was outlined a gigantic animal head. . . .

THE STARKENDEN QUEST

By Gilbert Collins

A lovely lost girl, an all but hopeless clue, a forbidden land where mysterious gods brooded and unseen terror menaced. . . . No stranger journey had mortal man ever taken than that haunted safari which lured Crayton to the brink of the Unknown—and beyond. . . .

CHAPTER I

THE APE WITH A GOLDEN BEARD

THE Hotel of Four Winds, Yokohama, is not in the first flight or even in the first three or four, though it has recommendations to compensate for its lack of social elevation. For one thing the company, which comprises waifs and strays from all the seven seas, human flotsam and jetsam from the broad world round, is a good deal more intriguing than any to be found in environments of strict respectability. The other main attraction offered by the Four Winds is its mild tariff. It was that which drew me to pitch my tent there. I felt constrained to do so from considerations of common honesty.

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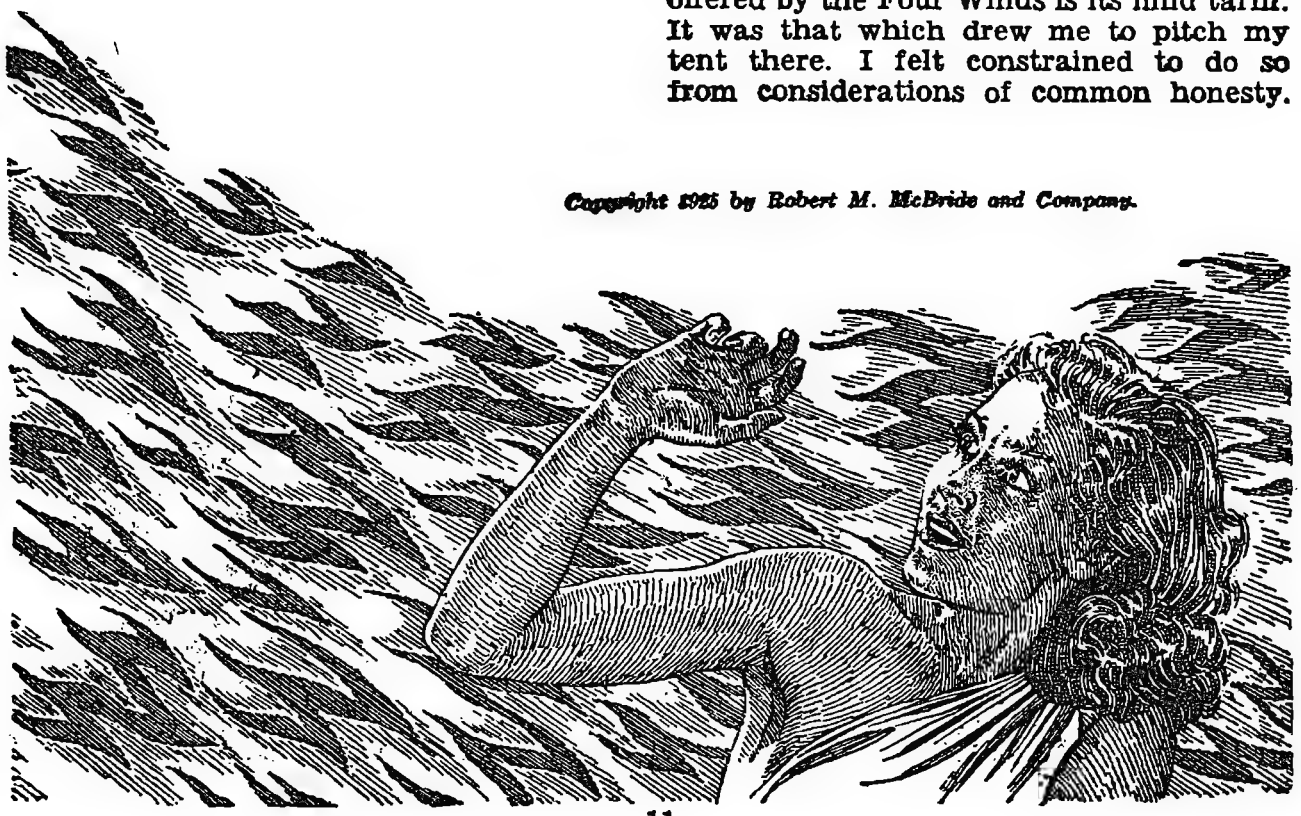

If you are running up scores you have no prospect of ever being able to settle, the more honourable course is, after all, to run up short in preference to long scores.

My financial collapse forms no more than a prelude to the astounding events I am going to describe in this narrative, and I will dismiss the subject briefly. It is enough to say that my name is John Crayton, and that up to the time of my ruin I had belonged to the class sometimes called, by way of objurgation, the "idle-rich." Our wealth had originally accrued at the time the Suez Canal was constructed. Much of it had been dropped in ill-considered speculation in the meantime, yet when I inherited my share from my father shortly before his death there was quite enough to maintain me in a butterfly existence; and after being educated at the Sorbonne I had spent the greater part of my life in desultory travel.

The crash came not long after my arrival in Japan from Valparaiso. On presenting letters of credit from the Parisian bank where my capital was deposited, I learned that that institution was for the moment under a cloud. I spent half a day, and money I should have been wiser to husband, telegraphing for details, and learned that half the board of directors were under arrest. Then the news came through the customary journalistic channels. My bank had gone to pieces like a house of cards. Its failure was creating the greatest financial scandal of recent years. Half a dozen smaller concerns had been dragged down in the same catastrophe, and the assets of my bank were not expected to realise five centimes in the franc. In short, I was a pauper, stranded roughly eleven thousand miles from home.

It was then that I descended from my original hotel to the Four Winds. The proprietor had accepted me on the strength of my clothes, which were new enough to command respect, and for a week all went well. But yesterday, when he presented his bill, there was a change for the worse. Modest as it was, I hadn't the amount of that bill. Relations between me and the proprietor of the Four Winds were delicate to the point of strain.

The long bar of the Four Winds had been empty when I came downstairs, but at this moment somebody entered through the passage leading into the street. I had never seen this man before. Nor had I seen anybody like him, for he was, I think I may say without exaggeration, the most startlingly repulsive and misshapen fellow—for a European, at least—that you would find in a year's travel. His dress and manner proclaimed him European, certainly, but the cast of his countenance belonged to no continent; it was scarcely human.

The head was huge, the forehead low and sharply receding, the square underjaw hideously protruberant, the small, deep-sunk, cat-like eyes glittered greenly from their recesses, and the few inches of mahogany skin round those eyes was the only portion of the man's face not matted with a coarse golden hair that swept down into a beard of unusual length and profuseness. I had read of this type—though principally, it must be confessed, in works of fiction—and had always associated it with broad shoulders and a deep chest and general promise of rugged strength; but this fellow was not true to pattern. Far from it. His frame was slender, almost frail-seeming, and if his arms were long and his legs bowed there was not a hint of abnormal power about them. All the man's strength looked to be concentrated in that bull neck and that awful, simian head.

He went to the counter, perched himself on a tall stool, and sat sipping a glass of plain water for which he had meticulously insisted on paying the native bartender one cent of local currency. During the next few minutes he several times glanced round at me, as if half determined to come across and speak. Had I know where my association with that man was going to lead me, I question whether I should have waited to see whether he would or not. It is likelier I should have risen and left the bar, and got away with as little delay as possible to the other end of Yokohama.

BEFORE the ape-like stranger had made up his mind, there occurred an unexpected diversion. Noises of scuffling and hoarse laughter sounded along the passage, and three sailors entered the bar. From a long way off those men betrayed their nationality; their appearance, as soon as they had come in, revealed the additional fact that they were large men and fresh—fresh in the special, alcoholic sense of the term. I continued to study the advertisement column of the newspaper, though I could see under my eyelids that the newcomers were sociably disposed: they were sweeping the room for some fourth party to rope into their jamboree. They saw me,

but the little ape-like stranger appeared to attract them more. All three of the bluejackets affected to fall back in astonishment.

"Say, Consul!" cried the largest of them. "What'll you drink?"

Goldbeard slid off the stool and stood facing them, his long arms hanging loose at his sides and seeming to reach to his knees.

"Pardon me," he said, in a deep rumbling voice that reached me easily at the other end of the bar. "I represent no foreign power in any official capacity. Nor have I ever done so."

"You don't say! Waal, how was Phineas T. doin' when you quit, anyway?"

"Phineas T.?"

"Sure! Phineas T. Barnum!"

All three sailors burst into a roar of laughter, and I caught the exact force of that appellation Consul—the name, I believe, of an all-but-human chimpanzee once possessed and exhibited by the famous showman.

The small fellow sidled out from his corner, along the counter, and remained there for a moment of ominous calm. He was now within full view of me but for all that I didn't rightly see what happened. It happened too quickly for the eye to follow. The result was apparent enough, however. There was a noise like the popping of an inflated paper bag, only a great deal louder; the big bluejacket rocked three or four feet endways, and the right side of his face, which was towards me, flushed the color of a beet from gills to temple.

An instant later the sailor had begun to swing his huge, ham-like fists in the accepted style of a man who fights purely as nature prompts him. I saw Goldbeard duck quickly under these wild circles of devastation, but then again he was too swift for me to grasp exactly what took place. So far as I could see, he flashed in and planted one blow in the region of his antagonist's heart; at all events, one blow or more, it was sufficient. The bluejacket staggered, his enormous fists dropped, his face went forward empty of expression, his knees wobbled, and in another second he would have wilted gently to the floor had not the other caught him.

At the moment I fancied Goldbeard was going to be knightly enough to deposit his victim in a chair, but I had overrated Goldbeard's knightlihood. His intent was still very hostile. With a sudden queer jerk he lifted the big sailor bodily, and with an even queerer one shot him spinning across the room. Luckily for the latter there was an intervening table to break his flight; otherwise he would have put his head through the wooden party wall at the back of the bar, perhaps broken his neck; as it was, he carried the table over with a crash and came to earth none too comfortably himself. He then lay still.

Across the silence that ensued the deep voice of the stranger rumbled and burred. "If any other gentleman feels the want of a lesson in manners," he said, "I am still here."

He then took up a position on another stool about midway along the counter, ordered the bartender to bring his unfinished glass of water, and sat half facing the two other sailors. These ran to their companion, whom they dragged up by the arms and jolted brusquely until sense returned into his blank face.

Goldbeard appeared not to have noticed. He was preoccupied with other matters: pouring water over each of his hands in turn and allowing the liquid to drip down into a spittoon; he then delicately wiped his hands with a large silk handkerchief, laid another copper on the counter, and called for a fresh glass of water.

I instinctively edged nearer. It seemed to me that there would now develop something really serious in the way of trouble. Nor was I at fault in my anticipations. The big sailor exchanged speaking glances with his companions; the three of them muttered together: it was quite clear what was coming.

I then took the step which, as it turned out, was to decide my destiny. As quickly as I could get there, I ranged myself alongside of Goldbeard.

"Easy on!" I shouted. "If there are going to be three of you, I'll take a hand, too!"

It would be hard to say what would have been the upshot of the brawl had not a fresh diversion now arisen—one equally welcome and unexpected to me. The bartender was still unconcernedly polishing glasses, as I believe he had been doing throughout the quarrel, yet he must have done something else besides. It may be that harsh experience at the sign of Four Winds had taught him how to transmit an S.O.S. in time of riot without letting the rioters know he had betrayed them.

Two Japanese gendarmes entered the bar. They were small men, those police-

men, for all their big swords, yet they lent a most pronounced impression that plenty more of their kind would be forthcoming if required in the interests of law and order. And their arrival took swift effect. The three sailors, assuming an air of innocence misunderstood, sheered off to continue their jag elsewhere; peace reigned at the Hotel of Four Winds, and I was left alone in the bar with Goldbeard once more.

"I thank you for your proffered assistance," he rumbled, turning to me. "I do not think I should have needed it, however. It is a curious thing that men who spend so much of their time fighting as those men do should never acquire the least idea how to fight. They are as helpless as children, really."

"That fellow certainly looked helpless when you'd finished with him," I said. "You don't happen to have been a boxer in your day—professionally, I mean?"

It was an unfortunate remark. There was more than a suspicion of a smoulder in those cat-like eyes of his as he stared stiffly at me.

"My family have produced many fighting men," he said at last, "and that over a long period of years. But I fancy it was always to the battle-field that their professions took them. Not to the prize-ring, my dear sir! My name is Starkenden."

He continued to scan my face very searchingly, as if to see whether the name conveyed anything to me. It did. And his steady gaze, I must confess, had a curiously hypnotic effect upon me. In that instant I not only remembered where I had heard the name Starkenden before, but in what connection. There even rose before my mind's eye a vaguely defined picture of a little old-world village in the south of England, of the same name as the ancient family which owned it. The locality, I recollected, had blazed up into fleeting notoriety some years ago by reason of a lawsuit, though little of the affair remained with me now but the bare name.

"My name is Abel Starkenden," I heard the stranger repeat.

I handed him my card, which he took and examined thoughtfully for a few moments. "H'm!" he muttered at length. "You do not belong to the trading community of this port, then?"

"I wish I did," I said, with a rueful laugh. "My prospects would no doubt be brighter."

"Indeed! And what misfortune, exactly, has brought you to this den?"

WE HAD now withdrawn to my table in the corner of the bar. At any other time I should have felt the stranger was unduly inquisitive into my affairs, but just now I rather welcomed such curiosity, and spoke out. He listened with keen attention, but said nothing, though he was still eyeing me very closely. I then inquired what had led him to enter a haunt so manifestly below him.

"My reason was an unusual one," he said slowly. "I came here because I happened to know this place is a common rendezvous for Europeans whose remittances have failed them. And I hope before long I shall find a man so pressed for money that he will be disposed to take even what I have to offer him."

"That sounds interesting," I said, "if not illuminating. What precisely is the job?"

"I am afraid that is the very feature of it which would be considered a disadvantage," he replied. "I am not in a position to disclose the exact nature of the work—not yet, at least. The man who takes service with me must be content to place himself unreservedly at my disposal, and to ask no questions either now or hereafter. Yet I do not despair of finding a man so hard up that he will join me even on those conditions."

"Well, if it's a question of how hard up a fellow can be, you'll go a long way before you find a likelier competitor than me. Beyond a handful of small silver in my hip pocket I haven't a cent in the world."

He looked at me more keenly. "Then if I were to offer you the position—" he suggested, and broke off.

It was about as cool a proposition as one man could make to another, true, and yet I was desperately anxious not to neglect a chance, however unpromising.

"One thing," I said. "You'll tell me nothing about the work yet. Well and good—I waive the point. But seeing the affair demands such a high standard of discretion I presume the pay would be proportionately high? What—er—is the wage?"

Once again Starkenden drew back his head rather sharply. At length, however, he nodded and said: "There could be no point in concealing the wage, of course. But I am afraid you will be disappointed if you were expecting it to be princely. The regular pay for this employment, Mr. Crayton, is three hundred dollars a month so long as the employment lasts."

I whistled. "And a secret job at that—"

"All expenses to be borne by me," he continued, more emphatically, ignoring the objection.

"Very well," I said, as casually as I could. "I am prepared to take it on and chance it."

"I am glad to hear you say so," he replied briskly. "Now to business. At seven o'clock sharp tonight you will present yourself at a foreign house on the Bluff. The house called Havenview. If I am not there, you will please wait till I come. Possibly by that time I may be able to tell you something more definite about your duties, but for the present, bear in mind—not a word to a soul. It would be most unfortunate if you were to neglect that warning!"

Before departing, Starkenden gave me a note for fifty yen on account of salary.

"You will find me methodical in my habits, Crayton," he said. "I shall be glad of your receipt."

I gave it, and Starkenden left the room with what I soon discovered to be his usual gait—a sort of sidling, furtive walk like the walk of a cat, and as noiseless.

Curiously enough, the surprises of the day were not over. Barely an hour after Starkenden left me, in that same disreputable inn I met a man I hadn't seen for years.

I had a shrewd notion that whatever this business of Starkenden's might be, it would not be prosecuted in such a humdrum commercial centre as the port of Yokohama. I therefore took advantage of my restored solvency to pay what I owed at the sign of Four Winds; ordered a very early dinner, and went upstairs to put my belongings straight, in case I should be obliged to leave in a hurry. When I came down again the bar had filled up. The present company were strangers to me—all but one man, and him I recognised at once, though it must have been twelve or thirteen years since I saw him last. His plump figure was perhaps a shade less plump, and his round rosy features less round, less rosy, and tanned a good deal darker than the suns of Windlesham had ever tanned them; yet in essentials, Gregory Hope was pretty much the same cheerful fellow I had said goodbye to at the door of our old school at the last leave-taking. I went up and tapped him on the shoulder.

"What!" he cried, wheeling round. "You, Crayton! Is this the quarter of the globe you infest?"

"I'm quite a recent arrival," I said, shaking the chubby hand he held out to me. "But how about you—do you belong to the Far East?"

"You bet! And the Far West, too. *And* the Far North and the Far South. I'm like that fellow in the song, you know—all the world's my country."

"What have you been doing since school—abroad all the time?"

"Practically. I got in a ship right from school and transferred myself overseas. At the beginning of things I seem to remember I was cutting for rubber at Para. The Braziliano is a simple soul, Crayton, but he proved subtle enough for me and to spare. I got stuck with an area of forest that turned out to be not rubber at all but a sort of tree-fern, handsome enough to look at but useless for commerce. I tried again in the Straits, with plantation trees. By that time rubber had slumped like footwarmers in Hades. Yet again I flitted. Mutton-rearing in New Zealand held me for a season, and later still I clerked it in a diamond office in Jo'burg. But if I were to start telling you all my stunts it would take a week."

"What did you come here for?"

"Because," he said with a broad grin, "I was the same kind of fool I've always been. Heard of something better, d'you see? I was in Batavia at the time, propagating English perfumes among the languid vrouws of the Dutch spice traders. I had a ducat or two in the casket, too—not many, you know, but enough to keep the panther from the compound gate. Then I head—oh, such tales of the Mongolian fur industry. I cleaned myself out getting to Mongolia. Well, whatever the Mongolian fur industry may have been in its day, it's not that now. So I'm trying something else here, though at the present moment—"

"Like me?"

"Eh? *You* on a reef, too?"

I briefly recounted the disastrous bank failure that had ruined me.

Hope's face took on a look of genuine concern.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Hope what branch of mercantile enterprise he was launching into now, but it occurred to me at once that he might repay the compliment by inquiring about my present employment—an inquiry which would have been embarrassing, to say no more of it. I therefore bade him goodbye in general terms, and watched him depart with as jaunty a swagger as if all his long tale of

trading disaster had been brilliant success.

About two hours later, having dined and squared everything at the sign of Four Winds, I made off towards the Bluff. It was now growing dusk, and what with the bad light and the coolie's blank ignorance of English names I had a good deal of difficulty in finding the house called Havenview, which stood high up and at some considerable way from the centre of the city. The whole place appeared to be in darkness. I knocked at the door, which was at length opened by a servant. I could see he was a native, but not much more about him, for the hall inside the door was practically dark, as was the room into which I was shown. I positively had to feel my way to a chair. The servant went away without a word, leaving me in complete silence except for the ticking of an asthmatic clock on the mantelpiece.

I sat there for several minutes, hardly knowing whether to be angry or scared. Starkenden's affairs must be of a very clandestine nature, it seemed, if they necessitated his keeping the whole house dark and receiving guests in this hole-and-corner fashion. And yet, strangely enough, the window-shutters were not closed; nor were the curtains drawn. Another minute passed: still no sign of Starkenden. Then, all of a sudden, I became conscious of a most uncanny feeling that I was being watched.

I sprang to my feet, staring across the large room. There was a stir at the far side, an unmistakable gasp. Something rose out of the shadows and started towards me.

"Jimminy!" I heard a voice mutter. Then: "The devil's in this!"

A moment later I was peering closely into a man's face. It was Gregory Hope's.

I FELT him seize my arm as if to satisfy himself I was real.

"You!" he repeated in a low voice.

"You!" I echoed blankly. "What the hell are you doing here, Hope?"

"Not so loud," he muttered, raising a finger to his lips. "I'm doing nothing here so far. I came to keep an appointment, but the other fellow hasn't turned up."

"Who?"

"A Mr. Abel Starkenden, he called himself. A little hairy animal, pretty much like a baboon, only the wrong color."

"H'm. The devil *is* in it!"

"What! You—"

He hesitated, as I did too.

"I'm sworn to be mum," I said at length.

"Me too. Mum as a churchyard. That's why I didn't get up and investigate before. Sorry if I alarmed you, *amigo*. But—but dash it all, what's the point in being mum to one another when we're obviously on the same tack?"

"But how did you happen upon him?"

"In a very odd way. I'd drifted into the bar of the Will Adams this morning—for a bracer, don't you know. The red-headed baboon was squatting at the counter pretty close. Suddenly he whipped round to me and made a sign that I recognised—"

"Like this?"

Gregory Hope started. He took my hand and gave it a peculiar grip.

"Doubly allied, then, *amigo*," he whispered. "Apparently what Starkenden had spotted was the device on this Mongol ring I picked up in Urga a month or two back. I saw it in a native shop, and bought it because I was so jolly exhilarated to think the good old Brotherhood had reached even that God-forgotten corner of the earth. Starkenden took me aside and had very soon got to know I was cleaned out. He offered a job . A pretty odd job, too—I could have guffawed when he described it. The business reminded me of that old South Sea Bubble plant in the history books—an enterprise to be of enormous benefit to all subscribers but nobody to know what it was!"

Hope went to the door, opened it on the dark passage, and gave a discreet cough. There was no response. He then clapped his hands, and again, a little louder; and after a while I heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Got such a thing as a lamp, boy?" said Hope.

There was a long, deprecatory intake of breath. "No leady before eight o'clock,"—This from the servant.

It seemed such a queer reply for the fellow to make that my curiosity got the better of me, and I involuntarily joined Hope at the door. Now I realised that another person was approaching. A girl was hurrying down the hall towards us. I could see that she was of medium height, and apparently in a state of some concern; though little more was to be distinguished about her yet in that villianously dark house.

"What is the matter, Yoshio?" she said sharply.

"Oh, nothing at all, I say," broke in Gregory Hope. "We two were here by appointment, you know, and I asked the boy for a light. But it seems it isn't ready."

"No leady before eight o'clock," repeated the servant.

"Go and light a lamp at once, you rascal!" cried the girl angrily.

The manservant again inhaled deeply and deferentially, after the fashion of Japanese menials, and departed on his errand.

A moment or two later the girl returned, carrying a brass lamp in her hand. I could now see her clearly for the first time, and I had to admit at once that her appearance was extraordinary, even startling. She couldn't have been out of her teens, and was more slenderly built than many a schoolgirl, yet her figure was, I think, the shapeliest I ever saw in a woman of any race. She wore a simple frock of pale apple-green crepe taken in at the waist with a very narrow sash of dingy orange, and this garment, fitting her body like a glove, revealed the wonderfully clean-cut lines to admiration. Even more striking was the beauty of her face. The features were as firmly chiselled as a marble statue, and almost as pale, and the splendour of her great dark eyes was enhanced threefold by the contrast. Altogether she resembled Abel Starkenden, whose daughter I subsequently found her to be, in one point alone: her hair was of the rich, deep auburn tint sometimes called, unpoetically enough, "burnt copper."

One other very curious feature about this girl was the expression she wore. Pride, chagrin, and downright anger seemed to be struggling for mastery in her face, yet beyond these there was a strange suggestion of nervousness—almost a *hunted* look—in her eyes. She vouchsafed no further remark to us, but set the lamp in the middle of the table, and very carefully adjusted the wick. Very carefully indeed. She was so long over it that I looked at her in surprise, and remained staring a good deal harder, I am afraid, than a man with pretentions to breeding has any right to stare at a woman, however fascinating; and I couldn't help noticing that from time to time she glanced up quickly at the window.

Then, to my utter astonishment. I saw her start, and tremble, and totter. In an instant Hope had sprung up, and darted round to the other side of the table and caught her in his arms, and only just in time, for I believe in another instant she would have fallen. He half led, half carried her to a couch against the wall, and helped her on to it. The girl was not unconscious, but those beautiful features of hers were drawn and dead white, the eyes wide with horror; she made a queer noise in her throat, as if trying to speak but unable to frame the words, and she stared towards the window and feebly pointed with her outstretched fingers.

Then Gregory Hope and I wheeled round and saw for ourselves.

There was a face looking into that room. It wasn't close against the glass, but it was near enough to be clearly distinguishable by the light of the lamp that had just been brought in, and in the few seconds I saw it, that face was very vividly imprinted upon my mind. It wasn't the kind that is easily forgotten. It was regular-featured, handsome, even beautiful, yet with the sinister, soul-chilling beauty which theatrical producers traditionally allot to the Mephistopheles of Gounod's masterpiece; a strong, sombre, boding countenance, alive with outward fascination but suggesting the profoundest potentiality for evil within. I should have said it belonged to a middle-aged man—if it belonged to a man at all—yet there remained with me a marked impression that the hair on the temples was of pure, glistening white. Strangest of all, and most horrible, was the way that apparition vanished. It seemed not to move sideways or downwards, but suddenly to melt away into the darkness of the night.

It was a cry from Gregory Hope that called me to myself.

"Fetch the servant, Crayton!" he gasped. "She's fainted!"

I RAN out into the hall and called the boy Yoshio. He came at a run. When I had despatched him for smelling-salts and a pitcher of water I opened the front door of the house and stole out into the garden. Everything was dark, still and silent. I crawled on my hands and knees from the wall of the house to the clipped tea-hedge that lined the road, then peered over the hedge and into the darkness in all directions. I could see nothing and I could hear nothing.

By the time I had got back to that front room the girl was beginning to regain her senses. She had sat up on the couch and was staring at the window. Suddenly she turned and looked from one to the other of us.

"You saw it?" she demanded fiercely, stabbing with her finger in the direction of the garden.

"I thought I saw somebody looking

through the window," I put in. "And while you were lying on the sofa, Miss Starkenden, I went out to see what the fellow was about. But he was too quick for me—he'd vanished."

Her slender form shuddered like a reed in a gust of wind.

"It always vanishes suddenly," she said in a voice we could hardly catch.

"You've seen it before?" cried Gregory.

Miss Starkenden stared at him, then at me; the lurking terror in those large dark eyes was now vivid and undisguised.

"When that face first appeared at the window of this room," she said, "I ran out myself to see who was there. *There was nobody in the garden.* I thought I must have been mistaken, and did not mention the matter to anybody, even my father. I saw the face again, and again it vanished into thin air. I've seen it several times since. The longer this went on, the harder it seemed to tell my father. He has a peculiar temper—perhaps you know that. I—I—" She turned half away, twisting and untwisting her fingers. "You don't think I am mad, do you?" she blurted out at last. "You *did* see it yourselves? Oh, *say* you did!"

Gregory Hope frowned. "If you fancy you're threatened with any mental disorder over that face at the window, Miss Starkenden, you're at least going to share it with one of the stodgiest and most unimaginative fellows in the world. You were always alone when you saw the face before, I take it?"

"Always."

"If this fellow's been hanging round the house often, the servant ought to have seen him too. He's never said anything to you about it?"

"Never."

Without waiting for leave Gregory Hope strode to the door and flung it open. There was a scuffle, and the boy Yoshio half stepped, half fell into the room.

"What were you doing there, boy?" demanded Hope sharply.

The servant recovered his balance, and stood cringing and grinning. If he had been eavesdropping, he had at least forearmed himself with a screen against discovery.

"Man bling lis," he said, shaking an envelope he held in his hand. "Jus' now I bling in."

Miss Starkenden had risen. She took the envelope, started slightly as her eyes fell on the address, and handed the envelope to me.

"To you, Mr. Crayton," she said. "My father's handwriting."

I excused myself, and tore the missive open. It must have been composed in great haste—perhaps even great agitation—for it was barely legible, and the pencil had ploughed through the paper where words were underlined. This is what it said:

> Crayton: We leave Yokohama tonight. Hope should be with you now—inform him. Give messenger password *momoyama* to bring back to me at once. Then escort my daughter to house called Craigielie, where she will stay during my absence. From there come immediately to Jetty 4—*without being followed.* Messenger will meet you again on jetty and put you in launch for *Queen of Araby.* Haste is vital—steamer leaves at 9:30 sharp.—
>
> A.S.

I passed the note on to Gregory Hope, who glanced through it, his eyebrows lifting.

"Your father is called away on sudden business, Miss Starkenden," he said. "He wishes us to take you at once to the house called Craigielie."

Unexpectedly enough, she evinced no great surprise at this. What her features *did* express was a most palpable feeling of relief. "The Hulworthys," she nodded. "They will understand. They are good friends. I shall feel—safe with them."

"You were expecting your father to be called away?"

"He mentioned it to me some weeks ago. Give me one minute to pack a bag, and I will join you."

She left the room, and Hope and I were led by the boy Yoshio to the other end of the house, where we found the messenger waiting in the shadow of a doorway.

"You come from Mr. Starkenden?" queried Hope in a low voice.

The native grunted an affirmative. Hope placed his lips to the fellow's ear and whispered; the native grunted again, and slid silently away into the dark. We then returned to the front room, while Yoshio remained at the foot of the staircase waiting for his mistress to summon him.

Hope carefully closed the door behind us, produced Starkenden's note from the pocket into which he had thrust it, and scanned the document keenly, his back to the window.

"Very odd, this," he muttered. "I suppose it does come from Starkenden?"

"She recognized the handwriting quickly enough."

"H'm. I was only thinking it was queer for a man named Abel Starkenden to sign himself 'E.S.' that's all!"

I stared at the missive again myself. It was, as I have said, a mere scrawl, but now that my attention was drawn to the point I had to confess that the initial looked closer to an E. than to the first letter of the word Abel.

"You think the note's a decoy?" I whispered.

"If it was written by a man anxious to pose as Starkenden but not quite sure of Starkenden's initial, that slip might easily have been made, mightn't it? But what I was thinking of was that very curious apparition at the window. You got a good look at it, Crayton? You would know the face again?"

"It'll take me a long while to forget it."

"Me too. Now try and picture that face stripped of all its male characteristics. Put it on a woman—who does it resemble?"

A strange thrill ran up from the base of my spine. I saw well enough now what Gregory Hope meant, and I marvelled that the same idea had not occurred to me. Hope was pointing to the room above our heads, where we could hear hurried footsteps.

"FRANKLY, Crayton," he went on, "does that very handsome girl look like the real daughter of a misshapen animal like Starkenden? Don't relations between them seem a little distant—isn't the way he's shunting her off on to other people at a moment's notice just a trifle unpaternal? And would you say she was tremendously grieved to see the back of him?"

"She was pretty scared at the sight of the other fellow, at all events. And if Starkenden isn't her father, why does she call him so to us?"

"That's a riddle I hope to solve before long, *amigo*," he whispered, leaning forward and clutching my shoulder. "We're getting into deep waters here, but that girl seems to me to be getting into deeper. My prime inclination is to stop in this port and see she comes to no harm. Unfortunately I've bound myself to take orders from Starkenden. And if this screed is genuine it looks as if we're going to quit very shortly."

"You propose to act on it?"

"I don't see what else we can do. *Shhh!* Not a word more now. She's coming downstairs."

A minute later the house was dark and empty and locked up, and the four of us were descending the hill on foot, Yoshio carrying Miss Starkenden's belongings. The Hulworthy family must have had warning of their guest, for they welcomed her warmly and without any consternation at all. We saw her safe indoors, then made off swiftly in rickshas towards the harbour. As soon as we had reached the more congested streets in that part of the city I called a halt, dismissed the rickshas, took Hope's arm, and led him into a large European hotel—the one I had originally patronised myself.

I was glad now of my previous experience of the place. We passed in by the main entrance, walked straight through, and out of a side door in a smaller thoroughfare; and from there, doubling on foot along several narrow alleys, came out finally on the waterside. I was well enough acquainted with the geography of the harbour to know about where Jetty 4 lay, and luckily, there was no need to ask for more detailed guidance. Standing under an arc light a few yards away was a native who beckoned to us. We sauntered up: it was Starkenden's messenger. The fellow turned, led us to a launch at the end of the jetty, pointed in silence to the thwarts and made off. The boatman, too, appeared to have been given his instructions already, for he started up at once and headed at full speed for the middle of the harbour.

The acccomodation ladder of the *Queen of Araby* was actually half hoisted when we drew up under the liner's huge grey hull. We yelled to the sailors on the falls to let it down again, and by the light of the main deck flares we could see a small and well remembered figure violently gesticulating to the crew in support of our appeals. The crew gave heed. Down dropped the great oaken stair with a shrieking of tackles through the sheave-holes; Gregory Hope and I bounded on to it, and a moment later were at deck level.

Starkenden led us away down the companion, but before doing so he launched a long, eager stare out over the harbour, and I realised at once that he was in a state of considerable agitation. That impression was confirmed for me before very long. We entered the large double-berth cabin he had reserved for us, and

then, with the light of an electric full on him, I saw that something had indeed occurred to upset Abel Starkenden. His hands were unsteady; under the thicket-like hairiness of his face there was an undoubted pallor. He looked marvellously unlike the man who had knocked out that heavyweight bluejacket in the bar of the Four Winds.

Starkenden turned to me.

"Be good enough to shut that door, Crayton," he said shortly, "and lock it on the inside."

I did so, and sat down beside Gregory Hope. We had caught the vessel only by the skin of our teeth, evidently, for already we felt the churn of the screws beneath us as she headed for open sea.

"I am not unwell, Hope," Starkenden said in a voice now sufficiently under control. "But I have had a jar. This evening I have not only seen my plans within an ace of being ruined. I have been in actual danger of losing my life."

CHAPTER II

THE STARKENDEN LEGEND

"FOR the matter of that," observed Gregory Hope grimly, "we've sustained a bit of a facer ourselves."

"Let me hear everything that has happened to you," said Starkenden sharply, "omitting no detail."

Hope retailed our queer experience of the last hour—not quite as I have written it, though—while Starkenden greedily drank in every word. Long before the end he was on his feet, his eyes alight, his limbs twitching in spite of manifest efforts to keep them still.

"That face!" he rapped out. "That face—my daughter saw it?"

"Only too clearly. And I'm afraid it scared her a piece. She went off into a dead faint."

There was more of astonishment than anything else in Starkenden's face now.

"Faint?" he cried. "Why, she does not know—was there anything particularly—what reason had she to faint?"

Gregory shrugged. "I must admit that face at the window of your house came near knocking *me* all of a heap. I'm no believer in ghosts, but there was an uncommon spookish smack about the whole thing. Isn't that how it struck you, Crayton?"

"I never saw anything real disappear in the way that face did," I answered him.

The man before us literally reeled, staggered back to the sofa-berth from which he had risen, and sat down, fiercely clutching his great yellow beard in both hands. It was a grotesque figure he cut, yet neither of us felt at all inclined to laugh.

"Also," continued Hope, "when Miss Starkenden came to her senses she told us she'd seen that face several times before, and been unable to find anything solid in the garden to account for it."

"But I knew nothing of this! She has never breathed a word to me about it!"

"So we gathered from her. And the reason she gave was a pretty queer one."

"She told you who that person was?"

"Not a bit of it. The poor girl seemed to have fretted herself into believing that face at the window was a sort of insane delusion of her own brain—that's why she'd been afraid to mention it to anybody. I let her undertsand that the pair of us had seen it as clearly as she had, and that it was certainly some solid prowler."

Starkenden remained staring straight ahead of him for several moments. He was by this time fast regaining his composure, and when he spoke again it was in much the quiet but very convincing way he had spoken when I first met him.

"You will no doubt think I am behaving in a very curious fashion, gentlemen," he said at length, "though when you know more of my affairs you may not be so surprised. But enough of that for the present. You left my daughter at the Hulworthys'?"

Hope nodded.

"You then came straight here? You were not followed?"

"We took especial care not to be, and I don't think we were."

"Well and good. I sincerely hope for all our sakes that you were *not* followed. And now, as you must have been a good deal mystified by what has happenend, I will clear up one or two points for you. Had all gone well, I should certainly have kept the appointment at my house this evening and taken you further into my confidence then. First of all, I want your word of honor, both of you, that you will never breathe a syllable to anybody else about what I am going to tell you now."

We gave the necessary pledge, and Starkenden without another word began to wrestle with his clothing. He had soon opened his shirt at the waist, revealing a

leathern belt next the skin—which I couldn't help noticing was as repulsively hairy as his hands and face. He pressed a catch in his belt, opened a pocket, and drew out of it an object about the size and shape of a wrist watch.

"That is one thing upon which my present business hinges, Crayton," he said. "What do you make of it?"

I took the object and scrutinised it carefully. It was a mariner's compass, set in a silver case with a thin film of some horn-like substance over the face. The metal was worn almost smooth, apparently with age, but it had been carved in the first place, and I could still see running across the back of it two lines of characters which looked to me like ancient Chinese.

"I can see it's a compass, of course," I said. "Still serviceable, but rather antique workmanship."

"Antique workmanship!" he snorted. "I have indisputable evidence that that mariner's compass has been in the possession of my family in England for over *nine hundred years.*"

It was a tall statement, to say no more of it, but if I was astonished then, in another moment I was staggered. Starkenden opened a second pocket in the belt, squeezed something out into the palm of his hand, and held it there before our eyes. Both Hope and I were now staring—staring and blinking. The thing in Starkenden's hand was evidently a gem, though of no kind I had ever seen or heard of up to that time. It was about as large as a wren's egg, bluish in tint and brilliant beyond imagination: it flashed and blazed to a degree that would have made diamonds of the first water seem lifeless by comparison. Starkenden was staring at it as well as we, but with a sort of gloating satisfaction—almost like a child exhibiting some marvellous new toy.

"You see it?" he cried. "You note its peculiarity? Watch!"

HE GOT on to one knee, and held the stone under the sofa-berth. I had thought so already, and I now saw I was right: the gem possessed luminous qualities of its own, quite independent of reflected light. We could see the outline of the farther sofa leg distinctly by it, but when Starkenden closed his hand, everything down there in the shadow was dark again.

Gregory Hope gasped. "Do you carry a

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thing like that about with you, Starkenden?"

"Very seldom, you may be sure," he replied. "But never fear. This stone is covered for three thousand pounds sterling—which, however, is a purely nominal figure. One could hardly arrive at the true market value."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Abel Starkenden in a sort of rumbling whisper, "there is nothing to price it against. To the best of my belief this stone is the sole example of its kind in the known world."

"What is it called?" My voice was a little hoarse.

"It lacks a name for the same reason that it lacks an established market value. I have submitted the gem—under secrecy, of course—to several of the greatest jewellers in Europe, for an opinion of its true nature. I got some very diverse views. Some regarded it as chemically akin to the oriental ruby, others to the diamond, though heavier and harder—it will cut inferior diamonds like cheese. Some experts ascribed the luminousness to radio-activity, others to a phosphorescence like the diamond's, but infinitely more pronounced, others would hazard no theory at all. But upon one point they were unanimous. Every jeweller who has ever seen this stone confessed it was absolutely unique to his experience—therefore nameless."

"How on earth did you get hold of it?"

"There lies the crux of the whole matter," replied Starkenden. "This stone came into the possession of my family at the same time as that very queer old mariner's compass, that is to say, gentlemen, *nine hundred years ago*."

"But that compass must have come from China!"

"Not necessarily," retorted Starkenden. "Shall we say, rather, from some part of the world that Chinese mariners were accustomed to frequent. But wherever it came from, I can tell you with complete assurance both the compass and the stone were brought to Europe by one man, and I know who that man was."

"Who?"

"I must go into my family history a little to make that clear."

Starkenden carefully replaced the gem in the pocket of his belt, but kept the compass in his hand. "As I believe you, at least, are aware, Crayton," he continued, "we Starkendens can boast a lineage that reaches back more than a thousand years. We are indubitably a Saxon family—or 'pre-Conquest' as it is usually expressed at the College of Heralds. There are perhaps half a dozen other such families left in England today—not more. And our home, Starkenden Abbey in the county of Hampshire, is almost as old as the family itself. Parts of that structure are recognised examples of the plain Saxon architecture, though most of it, of course, has been added during more recent periods—the extensive vaults, in particular, are thought to date from the fourteenth century. This compass and this gem, gentlemen, are family heirlooms, invariably passing to the eldest child in direct line of descent on that child's attaining majority, whether the parent still lives or not. The authority for the entail is a will dated 1760. Well, I am the eldest child of my generation—though only by a few minutes—and when I came of age the compass and the gem fell to me. I was greatly interested in those curious pieces of property.

"My father could tell me nothing about them beyond the age-long tradition and this one eighteenth century will; nor could our family lawyer, who was a keen antiquarian and better posted in our history than any of us. I was not satisfied, however—it seemed to me there *must* be other evidence if only one could lay hands on it. I got the will out from the lawyer's London strong-room, carried it down to Hampshire with me, and examined it closely throughout.

"I had of course to wade through a great mass of irrelevant matter, but in the end I came upon a very significant passage. The maker of that eighteenth century will had referred to the gem and the compass in some such terms as these— 'In obedience to the behests of an ancient record which I have perused.' An ancient record, mark you, not merely a tradition. There *was* an earlier document, then. But where? If at Starkenden Abbey, why had the record never come to light before? I searched every above-ground chamber of the big, rambling old mansion, but in vain. Then suddenly I realised why I had failed to discover anything. If that missing document was anywhere in the Abbey at all it must be in some sealed chamber, and the only sealed chambers I knew of were among the vaults. These have always been used as a repository for the family dead. My father was opposed to the investigation, but by this time it had become a very important matter to me. I could not draw back. I opened tombs which had been closed for many centuries, and at last—

to cut a long story short—I unearthed the document which was eventually to set me upon my quest.

"The record was in black-letter Latin for the most part, but at one point there appeared two words in English, and I knew from those words that the record was the one I was looking for. My next task was to unravel the rest. That took me twelve months of hard work. I had first of all to prime myself with an expert knowledge of the monkish Latin of the middle ages, and all the baffling symbols and cryptic abbreviations used by men whose only means of reproducing long books was by copying with reed pen. I then began to transcribe and translate, and by the end of the year I had extracted as much from that document as it was humanly possible to extract.

"Where I failed nobody, I think, could have succeeded, for there were sheets of the parchment from which the writing had become almost totally obliterated. But what I had was astonishing enough. There could be no doubt that the purpose of the document was not only to enjoin that the stone and the compass should pass always to the eldest child, but also to place on record how they came into possession of the family. The compass was referred to throughout as *Acus Magorum* —the sorcerers' needle, but the gem was indicated by those two English words I have already mentioned, *Eage Stan*, or eyestone."

STARKENDEN once more extracted the strange gem from his belt.

"As you can see for yourselves," he said, "this gem is cut in a fashion quite unlike any shape used by modern jewelers. The cutter obviously intended it to represent a human eye. And that fact was evidently noticed by the writer of the narrative."

"Who was it?"

"A Saxon monk named Erda or Yerda. He was merely the amanuensis, however. The narrative had been dictated to him, and by him translated into Latin either then or thereafter and committed to the parchment. The actual narrator was one Wulf Stearken Dene, who was head of my family at the time of the Norman Conquest."

"Where is the parchment now?"

"Where I found it—in the vaults of the Abbey," replied Starkenden. "I need not ask you to take that document on trust, however. I have a translation."

He plunged his hand into an inner pocket of his waistcoat, drew out a leather case, opened it, and carefully extracted a stout wad of folded paper. This he flatted out and handed to us.

"Every decipherable word of the original parchment appears in that translation, gentlemen," he said. "When you have read it, you will know as much about the acquisition of the eyestone as I know myself."

Gregory Hope and I took the manuscript. It was of very thin tough paper and consisted, I should judge, of forty or fifty sheets, most of them completely covered in small neat handwriting. I began to read from the beginning, and continued reading for two or three minutes, though without deriving much enlightenment. The narrative seemed to be a detailed but woefully intangible rigmarole of old English history, full of repetitions and Saxon names I had never encountered before; and the farther I pushed into it, the more involved it became. Gregory Hope tired of the perusal even quicker than I did.

"H'm. Pretty stiff and lumpy, Starkenden, eh?" he grunted at last. "You don't possess anything in the way of a digest, I suppose?"

Starkenden took the manuscript from him.

"There is no shorter version in existence," he replied.

"But perhaps I can direct you straight to the passage which most nearly concerns us."

He turned over the sheets, coming to rest at about two thirds of the way through. "Here it is," he said, pointing with his forefinger. "Read it for yourselves!"

The page was closely written over like the rest, but some halfway down it there came an interval of an inch or two. The gap bore a mass of figures neatly inscribed in pencil, and one isolated passage of writing.

The passage read:

" . holy places where eyestones grow in the rock plentiful as shells in sand, holy and secret places, yet known to the yellow sorcerers, servants of the magic needle ."

There was a long pause, during which Starkenden's head wagged like a pendulum as he looked keenly from one to the other of us.

"H'm. Where are these holy places?" demanded Gregory Hope.

"I cannot tell you. As you see, there

are breaks both before and after the words. It was an astonishing stroke of luck, of course, that those words should have remained legible—but for them I could hardly have divined what the parchment was about. Altogether, the writing we have here is not more than half the original Starkenden parchment."

"The parchment isn't really much use, then?"

"Not nearly so valuable as it would be if it were complete. The exasperating thing, of course, is that the first long hiatus should come where it does. If the situation of those holy places was recorded in the parchment at all, it must have occurred somewhere in that lost passage. Yet what remains is not without value. In my opinion, gentlemen, it is a record made by an eyewitness of many amazing things in distant parts of the globe."

"Oh! Well, look here, Starkenden. Suppose you give us the gist of the whole thing. You've a pretty accurate idea of it yourself, of course?"

He turned to the opening sheets and glanced swiftly over them.

"There is a long preamble," he said "which need not detain us. It merely details the affairs of the Starkenden family for a generation before the Conquest, and records how Wulf Starkenden fought in Harold's army at Senlac. After that fatal day, of course, my ancestor found himself houseless and landless and an outlaw."

Starkenden broke off, staring at the paper before him in a most curiously wistful fashion. It seemed strange to me then, and it seems even stranger now that I come to put it down in black and white; but it is nevertheless a fact, as I very clearly remember, that Starkenden spoke of the loss of the Battle of Hastings as if it were a *comparatively recent sorrow* to him.

A moment later he had whipped over several pages and was continuing in a much firmer tone.

"Wulf Starkenden took to the sea," he said. "He fell in with a band of Norse pirates, and set out on a voyage with them. There is plenty of internal evidence that Wulf Starkenden was now a desperate man; he had nothing more to hope from his ruined and lost country, and the fact must have driven him reckless—he remarks pathetically enough that he never expected to return to England. Had he expected ever to return, he would hardly have undertaken the voyage he now undertook. It was no ordinary voyage. Before very long there is a passage in the narrative where he describes himself and his band as having come to a region where each day the sun passed directly overhead. You see what that means—what it *must* mean?"

"That he reached the Line, I suppose. But it's a pretty queer thing for him to have done—if he *did* get there."

"Queer indeed," assented Starkenden. "Yet I fancy you will regard what follows as even queerer. Some pages later on, Wulf notes that the sun crossed to the north of their ship, then overhead again, though rising in the *western* heavens. What do you make of it, Hope?"

"I should say," remarked Gregory drily, "that that vertical sun caught him bareheaded and set him imagining things. How could the sun rise in the west?"

"It could not, of course. But a bewildered man, knowing nothing of geography as we know it today, and in a region where he had never been before, might perhaps be pardoned for thinking the sun rose in the west. Let me beg of you to look at it this way, Hope. Suppose, for want of a better explanation, it was the African coast they reached. Suppose they followed that coast down and down and then sailed up the other side—without realising the ship had made a complete turn. If the explorers persisted long enough they would come to the equator again, would they not?—and the noonday sun would be overhead once more.

"But remember, if indeed they had sailed down the west coast of Africa, all that time they must have seen the sun set to starboard of them. And now that they observed it setting to port, might not that fact delude them into believing that in these strange waters the sun rose in the west and set in the east?"

GREGORY HOPE sat a little farther forward on the edge of the bunk. I could see that this astounding legend was beginning to take a grip of his imagination in spite of himself, even as it was taking a grip of mine. No sound came for several moments but the wash of the ship as it drawled through our open ports, and the rustle of Starkenden's manuscript as he turned over more pages.

"There are innumerable and very similar accounts of landings on the coast," he continued. "Landings to secure food or to escape storms that threatened, and many confused descriptions of fights with savages and wild beasts, but through all the

There was a face looking into that room. . . .

haze and jumble there emerges one undoubted fact: the band sailed coastwise for month after month, and whether they continued to travel in the one direction or not, such was certainly their intention. Wulf Starkenden repeatedly states that they *did* travel always ahead.

"It is quite clear from the way he speaks about it that by this time he was convinced he had left our mundane world altogether and entered a sort of spirit existence, and that both he and his companions were more or less reconciled to the belief. Had they thought they could ever get back now to the world they knew, it is utterly unthinkable they would have ventured so far into the unknown. But what I regard as the most astonishing part of the narrative is yet to come. You shall hear exactly what Wulf Starkenden says."

He turned to the passage in question, and read aloud the following words:

"'And when a third time the sun was above us at the middle of the day we were come to a strait long and winding, and on the shores were trees bearing great fruit in a hard green rind. And many small boats of sharp stem were in that strait, and in the boats were many black men. Yet Lief the Steersman cried that these were not men but devils, for their mouths were full of blood, and we looked and saw that it was so. And we beat them off, and sailed through the strait and into a sea of many islands beyond. And here we met with the ship of the yellow sorcerers, terrible magicians yet friendly to us, and because their tongue was strange to our ears we made signs to them, and they came into our ship. And when they saw the white horns of the great black bull they greatly desired to possess them.

"'These horns we had long carried in our hold, for we had bought them of the black savages whose hair is like a sheep's wool, and given them one knife of iron for many of the horns. And now again we sold the horns to the yellow sorcerers, and they gave us the magic needle which is alive and a thing of great worth to mariners. And with the sorcerers we sailed many days, obeying always the commands of the sorcerers' needle.'

"When next I was able to make uninterrupted sense of the narrative the Norsemen were evidently on their way back, and the whole account of the inward voyage is immeasurably clearer than that of the voyage out. Mark that fact, gentlemen—it is most significant. Wulf Starkenden now possessed the 'sorcerers' needle, and put it to good use. Many of his former misconceptions as to the lie of the land he now revises, and he describes his return passage through the sea of many islands with such wealth of detail that I was even tempted to obtain a set of the best modern charts and search them for a region which would correspond to Wulf's description.

"I pass briefly over the rest of the Starkenden parchment. When finally Wulf reached England he appears to have been the sole survivor of the original band—the others had one by one perished of disease or hardship or in battle, and been replaced by seamen taken from other ships on the homeward voyage. The turn of the seasons in tropical latitudes was manifestly beyond Wulf Starkenden's skill to recognize, and it was not until he came into home waters again that he knew how long he had been absent—*seven years.*

"By this time England was settling down after the Conquest, though the Starkenden lands were in the hands of alien usurpers for another century, passing to us finally in Henry's II's reign, when Norman and Saxon were beginning to unite into the one English race. And those lands have remained ours ever since, together with the sorcerers' needle and the eyestone and—what I value perhaps more highly than anything else—the narrative of my ancestor's great voyage."

GREGORY HOPE sat up with a start, rubbing his knuckles into his eyes like a man suddenly awaked from a strange dream. He stared at the manuscript in Starkenden's hands, and made as if to take it into his own.

"Where do you suppose the man really went to?"

"That, as I have already said, I cannot tell you. But there are pieces of internal evidence which seem to me very significant. The black-skinned savages with hair like sheep's wool would certainly appear to have been Negroid. The white horns of the great black bull sound rather like elephant's tusks, do they not? And those points, taken with the details of the sun's altitude, render it very hard to doubt that the voyagers at least got as far as Africa. And there are harder nuts to crack yet.

"That very curious allusion to black devils with their mouths full of blood—what do you make of it? I pondered the point for a long while before I could arrive at any explanation. Yet there *is* a

possible explanation. The black devils may have been merely a race addicted to chewing the betel-nut, and I believe it is not until the sailor has made a great deal of easting that he meets races who chew betel-nut."

"Then what about the yellow scorcerers and the magic needle?"

"That sorcercers' needle," said Starkenden, "is unquestionably this old compass. And I only know of one yellow people who used the mariner's compass in Wulf Starkenden's day. The characters carved on my compass—which, by the way, I have never been able to get intelligently translated—are nevertheless undoubtedly in the language of that same people."

"You mean—"

"Do not misunderstand me," continued Starkenden, ignoring the interruption. "The thing is impossible, of course. I am quite as well aware of that as you are, Hope. Yet as I tell you, I endeavoured to follow Wulf Starkenden with the help of the best modern charts. And but for the fact that I know such a thing to be out of the question, I should almost be tempted to suppose that Wulf Starkenden penetrated *into the South China Sea.*"

Gregory Hope's mouth was round as a saucer.

I imagine that normally Starkenden was a man of few words, and that a long recital like this one came anything but comfortably to his tongue. He also seemed curiously anxious that we should hear the tale in as orderly and reasonable a shape as he could give it.

"The fact that those yellow sorcerers were probably Chinamen proves little. We know the Chinese had discovered the magnetic needle very early in history—they may have been in the habit of making voyages far afield from their own country. But there is another side to that question, and I should like you two to bear it in mind.

"Forgive me if I am wrong, but I take it that neither of you are well posted in the history of Wulf Starkenden's day. Personally I am. When I was studying the parchment I became deeply interested in early Norse exploration and made a close study of the whole subject. And I came to the conclusion—which I still most firmly hold—that our current ideas err enormously in the direction of timidity. As an instance, we were taught in our school-days that America was discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1492.

"I believe that absurd falsehood is still printed in school books. Why, I do not know, for no intelligent historian denies nowadays that America had been not only discovered but actually colonised by Norse and Icelandic adventurers nearly five hun-

"The Red Caps are just out of luck when Elmer gets a Wheaties breakfast on the train."

SOME guys will tackle most anything . . . once they've tucked away a big bowl of Wheaties. Famous training dish with milk and fruit. These 100% whole wheat flakes provide three B vitamins, also minerals, food energy, proteins. Second-helping good, too. Had your Wheaties today? Wheaties, "Breakfast of Champions!"

dred years before. The names of Bjarne Herjulfson, Eric the Red, Thorwald and Thorfinn Karlsefne occur particularly to me. And those indomitable sailors, mark you, originally set out across a huge open ocean, having no idea *whether they would ever reach land at all.* How infinitely bolder yet might men be who were merely skirting the coast! The voyages of the colonist of Vinland, moreover, had been made sixty years before Wulf Starkenden set his sails for the south, and by his time must have been well known to all Norse-speaking peoples. Those Norsemen may very well have known something of seas south of the Line, also. As you are perhaps aware, Africa had been completely circumnavigated by Carthaginian sailors as early as six hundred years before Christ; there may have been knowledge or at least tradition of that historic voyage among seamen of the Mediterranean, to which hundreds of Norse adventurers had certainly sailed. But enough on that point.

"For my part I make no doubt that many voyages of great length were carried out by Norsemen of the period, and that the true reason why record of only a few has come down to us is that those fearless old sea-rovers were a good deal handier at crossing oceans in ships than describing them in writing. Nor was my ancestor much more scholarly. It is tolerably plain that Wulf Starkenden, though head of a landed family of some standing, could neither read nor write, and that without the assistance of the monk Yerda his astonishing travels would never have been recorded at all. However, I pass on. The narrative of Wulf Starkenden is by no means all my story. And strange though it is, it seems to me almost commonplace beside what I am going to tell you now."

STARKENDEN paused again, clutching his beard in that curious way he had, and staring straight ahead of him at the upper bunk.

"I need hardly tell you, gentlemen," he resumed at length, "that my study of the parchment had left a profound impression upon my mind. The great, mysterious East took on a new meaning for me: I *knew* that sooner or later I should be drawn to visit that side of the world. And before very long I was. My brother Felix was the only other child of our generation. He had been as deeply fascinated by the Starkenden legend as I, and when our father and mother died within a few weeks of one another, and we resolved to try and forget our grief in travel, it was my brother's suggestion as much as my own that we should take an eastern route.

"This was sixteen years ago. We made all the usual tourist trips along this side of Asia, stopping a good while in certain places which interested us, and as time went on I became so enamoured of the East that I could almost have wished to stay out here a year or two. That, however, would have been impracticable for both of us. I wanted to see my daughter again—she was a little child in England then—and Felix had equally pressing cares at home. In dividing up the family property, which is subject to no entail, our father had left the lands to Felix and the investments, which are much more valuable, to me. My brother was chary of leaving his estates in the hands of a bailiff too long, and we had already made preparations to go home, when something happened which altered the whole aspect of affairs.

"We were in Haiphong at the time we determined to return to Europe, but as Felix wished to sail by a particular ship, and that vessel would not be leaving Haiphong for a month, we arranged to fill in the time with a sporting trip down coast. At the small port of Vinh we found the shooting so good that we threw up a temporary bungalow some miles out of the town, intending to stay there until the time came to get back to Haiphong and catch our ship. Then occurred that very unexpected event which changed not only our plans but our whole lives.

"One morning we were out on the paddy-fields blazing away at wildfowl when we saw approaching us along the top of one of the great dykes what looked like a procession of natives. They were advancing in a great hurry and signalling to us. We put up our guns and went out to meet them. As we drew near we saw they were carrying a rough litter, in it, a man, a European, in the last stage of collapse from some wasting fever which neither Felix nor I could diagnose. We took him into our bungalow and did what we could for him—which was little enough—and after some while the man had recovered sufficiently to speak.

"The first words he uttered were an entreaty to us to send all the natives away. He was near his end, he said, and wished to die only in the presence of his own countrymen. When we had done as he

requested, he told us who he was and where he came from. His name was Royce. He had struck clean through from the Burma side, prospecting for gems, and had got within striking distance of what he believed to be the richest field in the world—he had followed a clue given him by wandering natives and actually seen the river up which the gem field was said to lie.

"Royce had nobody with him at the time. He could get no bearers to follow, for the river was believed to be haunted by devils. He entered the river bed through a great gap in some cliffs, but his fever was already upon him, and he was obliged to turn back. Royce seemed to have had a horror of dying alone in the wilderness. At last he found a native village, and believing himself to be nearer the western coast than the one from which he had struck up country, he engaged bearers and had himself carried towards the French side with all speed. He had brought nothing with him but a fairly accurate map of the mysterious country and the river of gems.

"Royce gave us that map to do with as we pleased. If we wanted an experienced man to help us search for the gem-field, he said, he knew only one such man on this coast. That was an English trader named Coningham, who was usually to be heard of in Haiphong. Royce then begged us to give him decent burial in consecrated ground, relapsed into delirium, and died barely an hour after. His tale was a strange one, gentlemen, but the strangest feature about it, from our point of view, was this: those wandering natives had described the gems to Royce as *a kind of blue diamond that shone in the dark.*

"We had the body carried into Vinh, buried it at our own expense in a small mission cemetery, and returned to Haiphong to report Royce's death to the British consul. We found the trader Coningham was quite well known there, but that he was up river at Hanoi and would not be back for about a week. From inquiries we made, we gathered a good deal about this Coningham.

"He traded openly in gems, secretly, it was suspected, in other things less innocent, notably opium and slaves. Altogether, his reputation seemed distinctly unsavoury even for a French Colony, where it is never the custom to pamper natives. Everybody to whom we mentioned him spoke of Coningham with mingled dislike and respect—the latter, I thing, mainly because of his wide knowledge and experience of the wilder lands up country.

"Felix and I thrashed the matter out together night after night, and by the end of a week had convinced ourselves that Royce's gem-field was worth a few months' time and a few hundred pounds in traveling expenses to try for. But how? Neither of us knew anything of that little-known interior. Royce's map could scarcely help us, since its extreme edge represented country far inland. We bethought us of the trader Coningham, but over him we were at variance. Felix was for seeking him out and taking him frankly into our counsels. There was something to be said for this plan.

"Coningham's knowledge of the interior would be invaluable. Moreover, he was our fellow countryman and, as we had gathered, by no means a welcome person to the Tongking authorities, who are apt to regard any man not a Frenchman as an interloper. No doubt there were Frenchmen who knew the interior well enough for our purpose, but in the short time we had been on that coast we had seen something of the hide-bound officialdom that permeates the very atmosphere there.

"To let a Frenchman into our secret might easily result in its coming to official ears and being coolly taken out of our hands altogether. That did not suit our book. But then again, there was the very questionable character of Coningham. Such a man would be a precious ally if he ran straight, but if not?

"IN the end we compromised, agreeing to put Royce's story to him, with the rather vague general directions Royce had given us for getting to the gem-country, but for the present to make no mention of the map. Later on, if Coningham came in and proved himself a worthy confidant, we might show him that also.

"Coningham arrived in Haiphong the next day, and we laid our information before him. It was easy to see that he was keenly interested. He said he had more than once heard talk of this supposed gem field during his journeys through the interior, but had never judged it worth while to make an organized expedition on the slender evidence he possessed. Nor did he see that Royce's indications—we had made them even vaguer than Royce made them to us—greatly im-

proved matters. Altogether, Coningham advised us to let the affair drop. Should we decide to tackle it, however, he wished us luck and promised to say nothing to anybody about what we had told him.

"Felix and I *did* resolve to make an attempt. We returned down coast, quietly engaged a party of bearers and struck out on our own, professedly on a mere tour of curiosity. For a time all went well. We followed what we could remember of Royce's directions, and certainly found many landmarks which appeared to be identical with the ones he had enjoined us to look out for. Who should now appear in our wake but Coningham, with a party of natives. He said he had changed his mind after we left Haiphong, and would pool in with us if we wished, lending us his knowledge of the country in return for a third share of any money we might make by the expedition. We were both a trifle suspicious of this sudden change of mind on Coningham's part, though not shrewd enough to foresee what was in store; and the upshot of it was that we continued the march together. We did not require both parties of bearers, however. Coningham suggested that we should dismiss ours and take his, which he had engaged with better knowledge of their qualifications, and excepting for one man —my personal servant—we did so.

"Coningham was not an agreeable companion. On the very day after he joined us I came back into camp and found him flogging my native with a knotted baggage thong. I lost my temper and knocked him down.

"Felix patched up the quarrel between us, but there was anything but a friendly light in Coningham's eyes as he shook hands with me. It was about two nights later that the end came. Coningham had been out of camp during the day, casting about for Royce's route, which we seemed to have lost—we had come into a patch of jungle so dense that we had difficulty in advancing at all.

"In the night we were attacked. I was awakened from sleep beside the camp fire by a tremendous hubbub and yelling, and with only the light of that fire to see by, I could not at first imagine what was happening. Then I realized only too clearly.

"We were being rushed by savages armed with clubs. Nor was that all. It seemed to me then, and I knew it for a fact before long, that *Coningham's natives were fighting against us.* Coningham himself I could not see. Felix had scrambled to his knees, reaching for a rifle that lay near him on the ground. I saw him bowled over, and ran to his assistance, but before I could get to him I received a heavy blow from behind, and lost consciousness.

"It must have been several hours before I came to my senses. I was then lying out in the jungle, and Simbok, the native I had protected from Coningham's brutality, was kneeling over me. He had snatched me up during the fight, run for miles with me over his shoulder, and was half dead with exhaustion. I was in little better case myself. But it was what my native told me of the encounter that hit me hardest. He said he had seen Coningham close by, taking no part in the fight, but pointing us out to the savages and urging them on to attack us.

"When Simbok fled with me, Coningham gave chase, and the only shot fired during the whole affair was a shot fired by Coningham after us. It went wide, however, and Simbok got away. My weight was as slight then as it is now, and Simbok a powerful fellow, yet I do not think he could ever have outdistanced pursuit but for his skill in getting through the thick jungle that surrounded us.

"With Simbok I made my way down country, but by the time we reached the coast I was dangerously ill. I had caught a jungle fever, and what with that and the exhaustion and injury I had suffered, I lay between life and death for a month. When at last I was sufficiently recovered to move I approached the French authorities, laid information against Coningham, and asked for a military escort to strike inland and search for my brother. Simbok's impression was that Felix had been carried off alive. A small party was lent me, with whom I left at once for the interior.

"They patrolled the neighbourhood perfunctorily for about a week, then the lieutenant in command courteously but very firmly informed me that he and his men must abandon the search as hopeless and return to the coast. I was not satisfied with that, of course. I remained up country for several months, engaging my own natives and ransacking the territory far and wide, but never a sign of Felix or Coningham or the savages could I discover. It seemed to me then that Felix must have been killed and that Coningham, knowing I had escaped and was perhaps still alive, had fled the country.

"AT last, weary to death and utterly dispirited, I returned to Europe. There I found an alarming state of affairs awaiting me. Felix's bailiff turned out to be an indolent rascal—but I could do nothing to get rid of him. The fellow held an agreement from Felix, which only Felix could terminate. Meanwhile the estates were going to rack and ruin. I saw that my only way out of the difficulty would be to claim the lands myself as next of kin, on an assumption that Felix was dead. This I did, and after a lawsuit I assumed control, got everything straight, and remained at Starkenden Abbey for several years. But the mystery of my brother's disappearance was always present with me like a haunting sorrow.

"I may say that from boyhood up there had always been a most curious bond of sympathy between me and Felix, who was my twin brother. Never to this day have I been altogether able to convince myself that he died in that fight in the jungle. About a year ago this feeling became so strong in me that I returned to the East, and actually made another expedition into the country where my brother vanished. I could gather no hint of his fate, but I made one very interesting discovery of another find.

"I came across a village in a region of very dense jungle, a native village but ruled over by a white man—a Frenchman. This fellow, as I found out later, had got into grave trouble with the authorities some years ago and had to fly for his life. On the coast, apparently, there was a price upon his head. He had penetrated inland to this obscure village and constituted himself a sort of patriarchal despot, something after the fashion of the notorious Marie David de Mayrena. French colonials, as perhaps you are aware, have an aptitude for this kind of thing.

"The man took me captive, and would certainly have killed me had I not sworn never to betray his whereabouts to the authorities. I agreed readily enough to this, of course, but it also occurred to me that I might make a useful ally of the man, seeing that he was likely to remain in that region for an indifinite period. I therefore told him my story, and I guaranteed that if he gained information for me that should lead to the discovery of by brother Felix, I would make him a settlement that would enable him to live in comfortable seclusion in some civilized country. He undertook to keep on the alert. For nearly twelve months I heard nothing from him, but a month ago, a letter came. Ducros—that is the man's name now, though I fancy it was not always so—had obtained from wandering natives a fairly circumstantial account of a mysterious country away to the north, rich in gems and inhabited by a small tribe of savages *who had been keeping a white man in captivity for many years.*

"This was astounding news, yet I could not doubt but it supplied the last link in the chain. That those savages who carried off Felix were the actual inhabitants of Royce's gem field, I had never dreamed. It was scarcely to be expected I should, for the place where they attacked us was the very reverse of a likely gem-bearing country. It was dense alluvial jungle.

"However, I decided at once to go south

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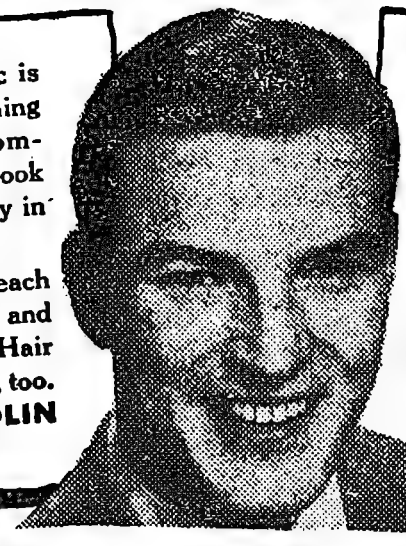

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again, to see Ducros and hear his news in greater detail, and if it seemed practicable, to make one more search for my brother Felix. But if it was a question of rescuing him from savages, native help would not be sufficiently reliable. I must have whites also. That, gentlemen, is the expedition for which I engaged you. Ducros is a formidable man, and I think he will join us, bringing with him my old native Simbok, who is equal to a white man so far as fighting goes, and perhaps a band of his own villagers. Then, with rifles and plenty of ammunition, we should be able to hold our own against a small tribe of savages armed only with clubs.

"I come now to the very disquieting incident of tonight. As I approached my house to keep the appointment with you I saw to my astonishment somebody in the front garden, staring through the window. I had only a side view of the face, but that was enough. I recognized it as Coningham's. My first impulse was to raise an alarm and have the scoundrel arrested, but immediately it occurred to me that to attempt that might ruin everything. Coningham is a desperate man. He was probably armed—I was not. Knowing that my evidence could hang him, he would put me out of the way without the faintest compunction when he saw his own neck threatened. And with me killed there in a scuffle on the lawn, though Coningham might pay for it with his life, there would be a very slender hope left for my brother Felix.

"I retreated a short way down the hill and took cover in a hedge, reviewing the whole position rapidly in my mind. Where Coningham has been skulking for the past sixteen years I do not know, for I have not heard one word about him. The only theory I can form is this. When Coningham fell in with those savages they could have given him no inkling that they themselves came from the gem-country. And the fact would hardly have occurred to him, for the same reason as it certainly never occurred to me—the surrounding territory not even remotely suggested the idea. Moreover, at the time of the attack Coningham knew the map of the gem-country was on my person. That is why he pursued me.

"In this way, apparently, he lost touch with the savages altogether. He may have then searched for the gem-country by himself, but in any case it is fairly obvious he has not found it. And he dared not follow me right down to the coast, for he knew that if I had escaped with my life I should denounce him. Therefore, I imagine, he vanishes to escape the consequence of his crime, but now learning I am East again, and hoping my vigilance will have by this time relaxed, he makes another attempt to steal the map, without which, as he has learned by experience, the gem-country cannot be discovered.

"All this flashed through my mind during the few seconds I crouched hidden in that tea-hedge. But one fact stood out before me very clearly. My first duty was to Felix. After I had done all that was humanly possible to rescue him, I would settle accounts with Coningham.

"I hurried down to the harbor, booked passages in a steamer just about to leave, wrote a note to the Hulworthys about Marah, and sent for you. And now, gentlemen, I think you know as much of our business as I do myself. It is a strange tale I have told you, but I have done my best to keep to plain ascertained facts, and not to ask you to accept any theories I may have made about those more mysterious matters connected with Wulf Starkenden's voyage. I shall ask you to decide by tomorrow morning whether, having heard all the circumstances, you are still willing to come in with me. Should you elect to do so, I shall expect absolute unswerving loyalty through thick and thin, and you must put yourselves under my instructions, without question, for the rest of the expedition.

"If you want to back out, you are free to throw up the affair now—I shall hold you acquitted of any assurance you have already given me. I will put you ashore at Kobe, settle your salaries to date and pay your expenses back to the place from which I have taken you. Think it over to-night, and let me know by breakfast time what you intend to do. And by the way—where was it you two met before?"

GREGORY HOPE started.

"You knew we had?" he queried.

"I can see by your manner to one another that you are old acquaintances."

"Old friends is nearer the mark, Starkenden. We were at school together."

It was now Starkenden's turn to start. "Good!" he rumbled. "Good! I am sufficiently superstitious to believe in omens, gentlemen. That happy coincidence seems very propitious for our undertaking. Good night to you both!"

Hope and I sat for a long while smoking and yarning over our long-past school-days. He seemed to give the present undertaking no thought whatever. At last, however, slightly on the wrong side of two o'clock, I reverted to the decision we had to make.

"What about you, Gregory?" I whispered. "Do you intend to go forward with this fellow?"

Gregory laid his hand on my knee and sank his voice to a murmur barely audible above the long, drawling wash outside the ship.

"I've got to go forward now," he said. "My curiosity has become severely inflamed. The earlier part—all that archaeology about the late Wulf Starkenden—is very fascinating, though a trifle off my beat. Starkenden's relation with Coningham is more what I'm after. I can't help feeling that what we've heard tonight is one side of a story. I want to hear the other."

"What do you mean?"

"Coningham's, *amigo*. What if Royce, on his death-bed, definitely instructed the Starkendens to take Coningham into the deal, and they failed in their trust? Coningham was Royce's friend, remember; the Starkendens were complete strangers. Suppose the map originally belonged to Coningham, and the Starkendens stole it! Not that I could see much in the way of injured innocence in Coningham's face tonight. But then again, that resemblance between the girl we called Miss Starkenden and the face at the window—that was deuced odd, wasn't it?"

"You think—"

"Nothing yet. But my suspicions are brewing. What if Miss Starkenden turned out to be Miss Coningham?"

"That fellow's daughter? Then why doesn't she know it? Why didn't she know him?"

"Cast your mind back sixteen years. She would have been a child of two or three then. Supposing her father disappeared around that time, she wouldn't remember much about him. She may have seen very little of him before. I believe it's the regular thing for traders on the French coasts lower down to leave their children—if any—in convents under charge of French nuns while they are away up country.

"Starkenden may have adopted the girl and always led her to suppose she was his own daughter. If he is really the wronged party, he may even have hoped that the lure of the child would sooner or later tempt Coningham to emerge from hiding. Perhaps it did, tonight. Though why Starkenden didn't step in and take the risk of collaring Coningham—I'm open to admit his explanation of that point struck me as being a little unexpected. Almost looked as if he was *afraid* of Coningham."

"It must have been a very unusual experience for him. I wish you'd turned up earlier in the Four Winds today, Gregory. I tell you, he was going to fight those three bluejackets single-handed."

"H'm. And by the same token he apparently expects five of us are going to conduct a small war against a bloodthirsty tribe. I hope we shall win. Anyway, I intend to go on with the stunt and see what happens. How about you?"

"If you're game, I am."

"Done, *amigo!*" whispered Gregory, and clambered fully dressed into his bunk. "But I could wish we'd had time to have had a few drinks together. I have a feeling we're not coming back for a long time."

With that he rolled over and was almost immediately fast asleep.

CHAPTER III

IN DEEPER WATERS

BY EARLY morning we had run into a brisk beam wind that was rucking up the slants of the long Pacific swell into snowy curls. There would be a cross-chopping sea on the top of that swell before long, and any queasy sailors we might happen to have on board would scarcely need to concern themselves in the matter of breakfast. Nevertheless the morning was a glorious one. The sun had lifted out of the empty ocean in a splendor of gold, clouds like puffs of gun-smoke chased one another across a sky of liquid kingfisher blue, and already the saffron streaks on those curiously fascinating Japanese cliffs eastwards of us were taking fire from the sun and flaming brilliantly up between the rich green-black of the pines. And over our heads the keen, clean ocean wind was singing sweetly through the stays—no music like it in the whole of God's broad earth.

At about eleven o'clock Starkenden looked in at the door of the smoke-room, where Gregory and I were whiling away the time over a spot and a game of banker, and beckoned us. We followed him to his cabin.

Starkenden closed and locked the door,

and motioned us to sit down. Hingeing out from the bulkhead was a small writing table upon which I noticed a railway guide, a shipping trade journal, and several slips of paper.

"Well, Crayton," he said to me, "I understand from Hope that you also have decided to join me?"

"You may count on me to do my best, Starkenden," I replied.

"I thank you both," he said. "And for my part I sincerely hope you will have no cause to regret your decision. Now as to our plans. During the night I thought out the whole position, and by this morning I was more than ever convinced that we must avoid a collision with Coningham at all costs. If he learns my whereabouts he will almost certainly try for the map which he knows I hold. It may even come to a murderous attack. Well, that could only end in one of two ways. If it were to succeed, there is an end to any possibility of rescue for my brother Felix. Should it fail, and we arrest Coningham, I could not hope to convict him on the evidence at my disposal here.

"I should have to go thousands of miles south to get hold of Simbok, the only witness, and bring him back north again; there might be a protracted trial in a Japanese court after that—and our affairs will not stand delay. Also, as a minor consideration, to prosecute Coningham now would inevitably mean the gem field coming to the ears of the French authorities, and would possibly endanger Ducros into the bargain. No, our best policy from every point of view is to avoid Coningham for the present and go ahead.

"How, then, to avoid Coningham? From what I have told you of him you will understand that he is not only dangerous but clever. We must pit our wits against his. And the best way to do that is to predict what his movements will be, so that we can arrange our own accordingly. Let us consider, then, his probable movements. That villain spies upon my house in Yokohama. Instead of me, he sees my daughter and you two. She is now safe among friends—nor will he be likely to trouble himself about her, even if he knows who she is. But in you he will have seen two possible allies of mine. He will remember your faces, for which reason it is vitally necessary that you, as well as I, should not hereafter be seen by him.

"Now in spite of Coningham's mysterious disappearance from that window, you may depend he was not far away when you left the house. You think you were not followed down to the harbor. We must allow for the graver contingency and suppose that you were: that Coningham saw you get into the launch and make for this ship. His next step, obviously, is to satisfy himself that I also am gone. He returns to my house, finds it still dark and locked up. He will therefore assume I was already on this ship when you came out to her.

"He dare not join the ship, even if he had been in time to catch her, for that would mean coming too close for safety. His policy is rather to dog us, but to remain out of reach until his chance comes. He can easily find where this slip is bound, however, and when she will arrive, and this time-table shows there were several trains he might have caught that would get him to Kobe before us. I should have traveled by train myself except for the fact that it would then have been a good deal easier for Coningham to keep us in sight without risking his own skin.

"WE MUST suppose he caught one of those trains, and is already in Kobe or nearing it. Now I have ascertained from the first officer exactly what this ship will do on reaching Kobe. She will anchor out in the bay for about an hour, then go in to a *hatoba*. Coningham will either be there himself or have an accomplice watching. I shall not, of course, appear. Coningham will then send on board to make inquiries for me. I have arranged for that. I have seen our chief steward and made it worth his while to inform any inquirers that we three went ashore by launch as soon as the ship anchored, and shall not return to the *Queen of Araby* till the hour of sailing.

"Coningham will wait on the wharf looking for our return—the gangplank will be the only way then, for the ship will be in a *hatoba*. Still we shall not appear. Seeing the ship leave without us, Coningham will infer that we have sacrificed our passages and are lying hidden on shore. He will continue his search for us there. Meantime we shall be off."

"That seems a pretty wide scheme," said Gregory, filling his pipe, "but is Coningham's spy going to take the chief steward's word for it that we *aren't* on board?"

"Not if he is the sort of agent I should expect Coningham to employ. The man will probably search the ship for us. I had at first thought to elude observation by remaining locked in our cabins, but there is an objection to that method. We

should have to open the doors to have meals brought in—I presume you do not wish to go hungry all day—and Coningham's spy might very possibly be loitering about the alleyways at that moment. The better plan will be to leave this ship altogether. And that is what we will do. There is a Japanese vessel, the *Hinoiri Maru*, lying in Kobe Bay at this moment. She is due to sail for Hongkong direct, twenty-four hours later than the *Queen of Araby*.

"I have reserved three berths in the *Hinoiri Maru* by wireless telegram to the ship herself. We must get on board her as quickly as possible after this vessel anchors. Coningham's agent will therefore *not* find us on board, and will report as much to Coningham, who will be driven to the conclusion that we actually *had* gone ashore and slipped by him. He will ransack the port of Kobe for us. He will still be busy with that when the *Hinoiri Maru* sails. After her, there is no other ship to Hongkong direct for four days clear—it should give us a valuable start."

"Wider and wider," put in Gregory Hope. "But don't you reckon that now Coningham has seen us leave on a southward route he will know where we are making for?"

"He can hardly fail to grasp that."

"Then what's to prevent him going to the French territories by the quickest connection and waiting for us on the beach?"

"It was a point that occurred to me at the very outset," replied Starkenden. "Unfortunately for Coningham, there are many beaches in the French territories. He cannot predict where we shall strike the coast. He might assume with reasonable certainty that in getting southward from Yokohama we shall pass through Hongkong. He may even have elected to go to Hongkong direct and watch for us there—an event we must be prepared for when we reach that port. But between Hongkong and the French colonies traffic does not flow in one great artery—Annam and Tongking are served by tramps rather than liners, and the routes used by those coasting vessels are various. No, Coningham will not willingly allow us to get out of sight beyond Hongkong, and if we can elude him as far as that point, we should have no difficulty beyond it.

"We shall get down to the French territories by steamer—I will settle our route later according to circumstances—then sail by junk to a point on the coast where Simbok is waiting for me. With him we shall strike inland to Ducros' village. I hope to be able to persuade Ducros to join us with a party of his natives, and we shall then make an expedition northward to search for my brother Felix.

"If the place where Felix is being held captive is indeed that mysterious land of gems, and we win through to it, we shall be in a position to achieve everything we set out to do. We can treat with the savages or fight with them, whichever they prefer. And should all go well, as I trust it will, we need not fear official curiosity afterwards. We shall have lined our wallets with eyestones by that time. And with Felix to support my evidence and Simbok's, I can track down the scoundrel Coningham and hang him like vermin on a barn door."

Starkenden was clenching and unclenching his hairy hands, in a most significant manner, as if he already felt Coningham's throat within them.

We steamed into Kobe harbour at ten the following morning, and followed Starkenden's program to the letter. As good fortune would have it, there was no difficulty about this; our vessel dropped anchor well out, and hardly was the accommodation ladder down when we spotted a

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launch passing—empty. Starkenden at once hailed her, and sang out "Shore" loud enough for everybody on deck to hear; the three of us were down the ladder and into that launch and away from the *Queen of Araby* long before the usual tenders and bumboats had drawn anywhere near.

We were quickly lost in the maze of harbor shipping. Starkenden ordered the boatmen to turn away to the *Hinoiri Maru*, which the latter did, and here again we were favoured with astonishing luck. The *Hinoiri Maru* lay a good deal closer in than the ship we had just left, but her ladder was down on the starboard side, and she lay with that side away from the shore. Starkenden thereupon paid off the boatman pretty munificently—to judge from the fellow's look—muttered something to him which I couldn't catch, and we boarded the new ship. I should have said that nobody on the *Queen of Araby* suspected we were not gone ashore, and that no watcher on shore could have guessed we had joined the *Hinoiri Maru*.

Starkenden's first move on this vessel was to interview the purser, who had fortunately not yet gone ashore for the day, and to claim the berths he had reserved by radiogram. He was closeted with this officer for some time, and we learned from him afterwards that he had made it worth the purser's while to omit all mention of us when comparing his passenger list with the one in the company's office. It now looked as if we had fairly well obscured our whereabouts, but to make additionally sure of secrecy, we were to remain in our cabins behind locked doors till the moment the ship sailed. Although, if Coningham was to discover us now, he would need to be more than mortally shrewd, or more than mortally lucky.

THEN occurred one staggering incident that not only brought all our plans to naught, but twisted the adventure into a new and totally unimagined shape.

As in the other ship, Gregory Hope and I were sharing a cabin next to Starkenden's own. We had had dinner brought in at six o'clock, ate the meal off a tray laid on the sofa underneath our ports, and when it was finished, rang for a steward to take away the things. The fellow came, we opened the door to him and locked it behind him when he went out. Hope and I had already put on our pipes and were shuffling the cards for banker, with which we had made up our minds to kill what looked like being a very slow evening, when suddenly there came across the dull drone of the harbour a clear bugle-call.

"Ship leaving," said Gregory, throwing down the pack and kneeling on the sofa to look through one of the open ports. I stationed myself at the other.

It was now close upon sunset, as we could see from the great elongated wall of shadow that lay far out over the still water beneath us. The vessel going out was none other than our former ship, the *Queen of Araby*.

She drew abreast, passing so close that you would have said a man on our deck could throw a rope into her boats—though I fancy there were over a hundred yards of clearance between us. Most of her passengers were evidently on the farther side, waving farewells to folk ashore, and that caused two figures on the deck nearest us to stand out all the clearer. They were looking over the rail of the promenade, a man in what looked to me like a dark lounge suit; and a woman in clothes of some lighter material.

I had already resumed my seat on the sofa and was rather absently dealing the cards when I noticed that Gregory Hope had not joined me. He was still looking out of the port. I made a remark to him, but it fell on deaf ears. He remained silent, perfectly still.

It must have been something unusual about the side view of his face that set me looking more closely. I sprang to my feet, scattering the cards broadcast over the cabin floor. At that instant Gregory Hope swung round and faced me square.

"What's wrong?" I cried.

He swallowed violently, then nodded towards the open port.

"The next cabin," he said, in a curiously strained whisper. "And speak lower."

I put my head out far enough to look along the ship's rivet-studded black hull. From the next port to ours there protruded two or three inches of a leather-cased cylinder that was apparently levelled at the *Queen of Araby*, now fast drawing away. It seemed to me that that cylinder wobbled from side to side, as if the hands that held it were not calm. Then it was drawn sharply back out of sight.

There were footsteps outside, and a violent tattoo sounded on the door of our cabin.

"Not a word yet," muttered Gregory Hope, moving towards it.

"Who's there?" he called out.

"Me—Starkenden!"

Gregory turned the key, opened the door a few inches, and peeped round. A moment later Starkenden had come in. His eyes were alight with a good deal more than that queer smouldering I had noticed in them once or twice before; agitation was written all over him, but it was not the agitation of fear. Abel Starkenden looked dangerous.

"I'm going ashore," he blurted out. His voice sounded like heavy weights being dragged over a floor. "I shall be back in a few hours. You will wait for me on board. But," he added with a downright snarl, "there is no need to stay in your berth!"

With that he was gone.

Hope closed the door after him, and sat on the sofa mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

"What on earth's the matter with you both, Gregory?" I said.

"Matter enough," he muttered grimly. "You evidently didn't see who was on the *Queen of Araby*."

"At that distance? D'you mean to say you could?"

"I might have been mistaken, but Starkenden had a glass. He saw all right. *That girl was Miss Starkenden.*"

"Eh? You—"

"And unless my eyes have deceived me for the first time in my life," continued Hope, "the man with her was the fellow we saw looking through the window of Starkenden's house in Yokohama!"

GREGORY HOPE had reached for his pipe and relit it. "Let me think," he said. "This is the oddest thing I've ever struck—by miles."

He remained puffing hard at the weed for fully a minute. It seemed to soothe him a good deal, and feeling greatly in need of a sedative just along then, I followed his example and lit up myself.

"Supposing," said Gregory at last, "that girl has found out something since we saw her? Something to change her views, I mean. What if she has learned that it was Starkenden who carried out the abduction in the first place and kept her with him on a pretense that he was her father?"

"Then Starkenden begins to look a pretty unwholesome blackguard. Gregory, do you intend to go on with this business *now*?"

"Not so fast," he said deliberately. "Let's hear all the evidence before we begin passing sentence. Starkenden may be a blackguard. He may not. We haven't a shred of real proof one way or the other. Coningham may be a blackguard too—if his face is any criterion, he has worse things than blackguard about him. Didn't he strike you that way?"

"It was a horrible face."

"Diabolical is my word, from what I remember of it. Further, I don't know that Coningham is one of us. Starkenden is. I shall conceive it's up to me to give him the benefit of the doubt until he's proved a blackguard past praying for. Wait—that's what I prescribe. Starkenden has information now that ought to be of pretty vital concern to him. He looks upset, very. Let's see what action he takes."

It was about two hours later that Starkenden returned. His eyes still smouldered, he looked dangerous yet, but the first gust of passion had evidently given place to a fixed purpose.

"You saw those people on the *Queen of Araby*?" he rapped out.

"There *were* people on deck—" began Gregory.

"There were two people, a man and a woman. I have a telescope in my cabin, and was able to distinguish their faces. That man, gentleman, was Coningham. And the girl was my daughter."

Following Gregory's cue, I did my best to simulate extreme amazement.

"Here—read!" cried Starkenden impatiently.

The two slips of paper he handed us were quite self-explanatory, and though I already knew the facts, those messages afforded me a strange thrill with the grim conciseness of their wording. They read:

"Joseph Hulworthy Craigielie Bluff Yokohama. Is all well. Starkenden Central Telegraphs Kobe."

"Starkenden Central Telegraphs Kobe. Would have wired before but ignorant your whereabouts. Marah disappeared day after you left. Have informed police but no news. Yoshio also vanished. What shall I do. Hulworthy."

Gregory gave back the slips with a long, straight look. "Starkenden," he said, "this is more than my wits will take in. Why should your daughter go with Coningham?"

"The villain has stolen her—clearly to strike at me!"

"That's queerer than ever. The woman on the deck of the *Queen of Araby* didn't look to me at all like a person who is being stolen. Broad daylight—no signs of a struggle—no attempt at concealment. How could that man have got her away from the Hulworthy's, and into the train to Kobe, *and* on to the steamer out of it, if

she wasn't willing to accompany him?"

"God knows what treachery the scoundrel may have used—perhaps forged messages purporting to come from me,"

"Even in that case she'd hardly go away without saying anything to Hulworthy, would she?"

"There has been foul play! If not, why has Yoshio disappeared?"

"H'm. I'd forgotten that. What have you done about it, anyway?"

"I have telegraphed a description of the pair of them to Hongkong, requesting the police to arrest Coningham and look after Marah till I come."

"You've not wirelessed the ship?" asked Gregory.

"I dare not. Marah is very high-strung, very nervous. If I have Coningham arrested at sea, what is she to think? The shock and suspense might injure her mind permanently. She has four or five days to spend on that ship yet. At Hongkong there will be scarcely thirty hours to wait for me. It is the lesser evil."

I am not going to say much about our voyage to Hongkong, which was as irksome a one as I remember. Starkenden sidled menacingly over the deck all day and half the night, glaring out to sea and uttering not a word to a soul; his impatience and exasperation were contagious, moreover, and before the end of the trip Gregory Hope and I had caught a little of both. I came to realise one fact more and more clearly during this phase of the expedition—Starkenden's concern for the safety of Miss Marah Starkenden was not feigned. If anything were wanting to convince me of it, the way he bundled off straight to the Police Depot as soon as our gangplank went down at Hongkong would have done so: any wish he may have had to avoid Coningham was now completely forgotten. Gregory and I followed him—at a run.

The chief of police sat back on his chair, laying his cheroot on the fluted rim of an ashtray. "You sent this telegram?" he demanded of Starkenden.

The latter took the slip, read it, and assented.

"Well, sir, I discovered among the passengers of that ship the two persons you were apparently referring to. But there was one very marked discrepancy. The young lady answered your description well enough. The man did not. Your telegram says a man with brown hair. The person who appeared before me here had hair of snowy white."

STARKENDEN snatched a bundle of papers from his inner pocket, drew out an unmounted photograph, and held it close to the official's eyes. "Is that the girl you saw?" he snarled.

"Undoubtedly."

"Did the man answer my description in every other particular?"

"Yes, I think I may say he did."

"Just so. The matter of the hair is easily explained. It is several years since I saw that scoundrel from close to. *Then* his hair was darker than mine. Lately I have seen him only from a distance, and in twilight, and if his hair is white I was unable to detect it."

"H'm. Then again, the passport he carried was perfectly in order, as was the girl's. Hers bore the name of Marah Starkenden. His, Abel Starkenden."

Our leader nodded grimly. "I see what it is!" he snapped. "The scoundrel is impersonating me. Here!" He tore a folded document from among his papers and threw it down on to the table. "There is my passport, with my name—Abel Starkenden. What that scoundrel showed you is clearly a forgery!"

The chief of police was manifestly puzzled. "A most odd affair," he muttered. "The man said he was Abel Starkenden, a Tongking trader, and that the girl was his daughter, on a holiday trip with him. There was even some facial resemblance between them."

"There is. It is a coincidence—and that devil has taken advantage of it."

"But if your story of abduction is correct, Mr. Starkenden, how do you account for the fact that the girl bore him out in every particular?"

Starkenden rolled his eyes round in utter bewilderment, and if that emotion was feigned, no man ever saw so amazingly exact a pretence of bewilderment before. It was pitiable to watch him—he seemed madly striving to clutch some solid fact amid all the jumble of shock and surprise. Some moments elapsed before he could speak.

"Intimidation!" he said—or rather groaned. "That is the only explanation I can suggest. The villain must have gained a complete ascendency over her—he is able to put lies into her mouth."

I may have been mistaken, but it seemed to me that the official started slightly at this suggestion. Perhaps he was summoning up a mental picture of Coningham's face—that sinister face, comely but cold, handsome but inhuman, that we had seen

at the window of Starkenden's house in Yokohama. It was preeminently a countenance that might be expected to hold a girl in its snake-like fascination—above all a nervous, high-strung girl. At all events, the chief of police was evidently beginning to admit to himself by this time that Starkenden's story might be the true one of the two.

"A bad business," he remarked. "An extremely bad business. Abduction, intimidation, forged passports—so much the worse for this Coningham when he is apprehended. That can easily be done."

Starkenden glared at him like a wild beast.

"You have taken no action against him?" he gasped.

"I could not arrest on the evidence I held," said the official, unruffled. "To do so would have been to exceed my powers. But I warned him he must remain in this port to meet your charges. He agreed readily enough, and gave his own recognisances for a thousand dollars not to sail before you came."

"Where is he now?"

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Starkenden, that he has jumped his bail. That fact, I may say, disposes me more than anything you have told me to believe the man is a rascal."

"You let him go!" bellowed Starkenden.

"News reached me last night," returned the chief of police, "that the pair of them left by the small French steamer *Tonquinaise,* bound for Haiphong. However, calm yourself, my dear sir. The vessel sailed barely twelve hours ago, and cannot be anywhere near her port yet. If you will take an affidavit embodying your charges, I will telegraph at once to the French authorities and ask them to arrest Coningham as soon as he lands. It will be a perfectly simple matter to lay hands on him."

But events proved it was not to be so simple a matter as the chief of police predicted. We took the next steamer to Haiphong. There we learned two very disquieting facts about the S. S. *Tonquinaise.* She had not arrived, and there was absolutely no news of her.

THE authorities at Haiphong displayed all the charm and all the failings of the French official abroad. M. Lacouperie, the Résident, had never seen Starkenden before, and was too recent an arrival from Paris to have heard of the old tragedy of Felix Starkenden's disappearance; yet he was full of concern for the present tragedy of Miss Marah Starkenden's abduction. And having received the cablegram from Hongkong, he would be delighted to arrest M. Coningham—if only M. Coningham's vessel would arrive to render this possible. But the *Tonquinaise* was overdue, and there had been no bad weather to account for it. So what could M. Lacouperie do?

"Unfortunately, *Messieurs,*" continued the Résident with a deprecatory shrug of his shoulders, "there is still much piracy upon this coast. And there will be so, while the evil Chinaman be employed for able sailor. It is he who conduct the piracy operation. A company of him by arrangement travel to Hongkong and engage for common seaman. At preconcerted signal, he insurge! He seize all rifles in racks! Who is then to resist him? He hold up passengers for their money, and put them adrift in ship-boats, and run that unhappy vessel on the rock. He make off in one of his abominated junks. which has come to him by plan, and he is gone away in one thousand creeks upon this lamentable coast. And who shall say which one of those creeks he is in?"

Yet as day followed day, and no news of the *Tonquinaise* materialised, it became

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more and more evident that she had not sustained one of the ordinary China-coast piracies depicted by Mr. Lacouperie. A ship run aground on a fairly well frequented shore is bound to be spotted in a day or two at the outside. The *Tonquinaise* had been seen by no man's eyes. There was a gathering belief that she would be seen no more.

Gregory Hope and I sat together in our room at the half-Europeanised hotel where we had taken quarters, and were smoking an after-breakfast pipe. It was the fifth or sixth day from our arrival in Haiphong. Starkenden was already out and about the harbor, seeking for news. He had offered in his own name a reward of two thousand francs for information leading to the discovery of Miss Marah Starkenden, and M. Le Résident, whose interest in the case had taken a huge leap from the moment Starkenden showed him that same photograph he had shown the chief of police at Hongkong, had officially duplicated the reward, printed the likeness with a descriptive notice, and despatched this for exhibition at every station from Monkay on the Chinese frontier to Saigon in the south.

Suddenly we heard footfalls on the wooden stairs, and Starkenden entered, followed by a native. Many such had been brought by him to our rooms during the past few days. As might have been expected, the two heavy rewards had evoked a torrent of native "information" from all quarters, though up to the present the whole of it had proved utterly vague and unpromising as soon as the informant began to be cross-examined. And while Starkenden had evinced an energy almost frantic in prosecuting the search, he had kept his head well enough not to leave Haiphong and its telegraph wires for anything that might turn out chimerical.

Now, however, we saw at once from his face that he believed he had a real clue. And for my part I could not help thinking that the native Starkenden brought into the room with him was by a long way the likeliest informant we had so far seen. A powerfully built fellow of medium height, square-headed and square-jawed, he wore a dirty white tunic and pantaloons of stout cotton, sandals on his feet and a native straw hat on his shaven head; yet the man had more the air of a prosperous Chinese farmer than of the somewhat abject natives of this coast. He had evidently been accustomed to some consideration, too; there was none of the usual cringing and tiptoeing about his gait; the fellow strode solidly through our room and into Starkenden's, which was next it, without giving us more than the most casual glance.

The door shut behind him, and we heard them in close talk for fully half an hour. When Starkenden reappeared he was alone, the native having apparently left the inn by another door and a back stair. Starkenden shut both doors of our room and locked them on the inside, then sat down on the edge of a bed, tugging at his beard.

"I have news," he said, in that queer rumbling whisper he used when he wanted to lower his voice.

"Coningham or the ship?"

"Both, I fancy. But the news comes from a source I was hardly looking to. That man who was here just now is Simbok."

"Your native?"

"He is not my native now. At the end of that last expedition a year ago, when I stumbled on Ducros' village up in the interior, Simbok remained there. Ducros wanted a reliable native overseer, and Simbok would not be able to stop in my service much longer in any case, as I was going north and he did not wish to leave his own country. He therefore became Ducros' lieutenant, and acquired cattle and wives.

"When Ducros gathered this recent information, he sent Simbok down to the coast with a letter for me, reporting the story he had heard. Simbok was to wait at a certain place for my arrival, and but for the intervention of Coningham with his devilish plot, we should have joined Simbok there long before now. Meanwhile, Ducros could not understand why Simbok had not brought me back with him to the interior.

"He expected that when I received his letter in Yokohama I should travel straight down—he seems to have forgotten that I might wish to bring other white men with me, and that it might take me some time to find suitable white men. In point of fact I was nearly a month looking for you two. Then comes this last utterly unforeseen delay. Ducros feared his letter to me must have miscarried. He has now ventured down country himself, and is at the rendezvous from which Simbok has just come."

"Where is that?"

"There is no name, and no town. The nearest is a small port called Nam Hoa, which is about ten miles farther down

I opened tombs that had been closed for many centuries!

coast than the point where Ducros is hiding. So long as Simbok was alone he did not dare, of course, to leave the rendezvous for fear he should miss me, but as soon as Ducros arrived in person, Simbok went into Nam Hoa to scout for news of us. There he learned from the reward notice that I was waiting here in Haiphong.

"Simbok has also heard a story of a strange junk seen off the coast down there, and Ducros suspects Coningham and Marah were on board that junk and have gone inland. Whether this is so or not we must certainly see Ducros without delay. The place is only about three days' sail from here, so there will be little time wasted in any case. We shall now give out to the authorities here that we are going down coast in search of news. That is all. They must hear nothing of the point we are actually making for—you will readily understand that Ducros' presence in that neighborhood must be concealed at all costs."

TRAGIC as it was, the abduction of Marah Starkenden now proved an aid to our plans. When M. le Résident heard what we proposed, he accepted it without the least suspicion; at the same time he rather pathetically hoped that we were not going to ask him for a military escort, as he would have to apply to Hanoi for sanction to that, and there might be weeks of delay before sanction was forthcoming. Starkenden handled this matter very neatly. He affected astonishment—even a little indignation—but at last replied that rather than wait he would take all risks upon his own head.

As the search might well be a dangerous undertaking, however, he would deem it a gracious act on the part of His Excellency to grant permission for arms and ammunition to be carried by us and the native crew we should engage; and after some heart-searching and a morning of solemn consultation with M. the Commandant of Troops at Haiphong, His Excellency allowed Starkenden to purchase the said armament from governmental stores. We were now well equipped for the expedition. We had a perfectly plausible explanation of our movements, several copies of the proclamation bearing the Résident's signature, an arms permit, and half a dozen obsolete but quite serviceable rifles, with a supply of ammunition.

We left at three in the afternoon, and before nightfall were clear of the delta and into open sea. The boat we had chartered was a two-masted junk, slender in the lines and unusually swift for a vessel of her build; she carried a crew of three Chinese, so that with the three of us and Simbok, we were seven men on board altogether. There was a fresh night-wind coming in from sea, and with this on our beam, the great ribbed lugsails braced well forward and a leeboard down, we drew away southward at a good round pace. For several hours the lights of small villages dotted over the delta blinked out at us across the flat, swampy shore; then one by one we dropped them all and were clawing along a blind coast.

We hauled out a little to avoid the bars and sandbanks that abound, though there was no need for us to go far: our junk was of shallow gage; Starkenden himself had made more than one similar trip and remembered something of the lie of the land; while the three Chinese soon showed us they were well up to standard for navigators of their race and could skirt these shores as confidently by night as by broad day.

The second night found us still pushing southward.

All day again we made the best of our way southward, and late that night now hugging the land in earnest, we were so close in that we could hear the unmistakable drawl of surf and sea, when we stood up on deck, the extended ghostly-gleaming ranks of broken water.

"This is the inlet," Starkenden whispered. "We now strike inland to the rendezvous where Ducros is awaiting us. The junk will anchor in this creek for twenty-four hours. If we do not come back by then, the master will assume all is well, and will return to Haiphong and give out that we have landed to follow a clew picked up on shore. Get your things together."

A stone anchor plopped overside, the dinghy was slung down by thongs from the junk's high poop, and we entered it, carrying small bundles of gear we had collected in Haiphong, the rifles and the canvas bag of ammunition. One of the Chinese boatmen then sculled us swiftly to the beach—a shelving surface so hard to tread that I knew it to be rock.

Simbok led the way, and we followed in Indian file, silently. There was little of the locality to be seen, but I realised quickly enough that the coast here was strikingly unlike those interminable mudflats we had skirted at the beginning of

the voyage; even while our path ran level along the creek-side we were scrambling over tilted ground—abruptly tilted at that; it seemed also that the creek twisted and wound inland for some considerable distance beyond the point where we eventually left it, for we could still see water, an eerie, wan shimmer, in the darkness away to our right.

We tramped in silence for about an hour over ground that rose continually all the way. The path was a mere thread of bare earth between some stiff, dry scrub, so rough and encroached upon in places that we stumbled to our knees. At last, a little ahead of us, there loomed up the faintest glimmer of light.

Simbok halted, Starkenden behind him. The two muttered together in a vernacular of which I knew nothing, then Starkenden turned to us.

"Wait here till I call, you two," he rumbled. "Ducros had expected me and Simbok only. I must assure him the men I bring with me are friends."

The two advanced together. For a moment that glimmer of light I had seen before appeared again, brighter, and I now saw that it came from the half-open doorway of a small hut. The door closed, there fell on my ears a brisk interchange of talk which I knew to be in French, though I could single out little from it beyond a frequent repetition of the words *"Monsieur, votre frère,"* and *"ce Monsieur Contingham."* Then we heard Starkenden's voice summoning us to enter.

The hut was of the rudest description, built of sliced bamboo and empty of furniture except for a native rush-lamp and a tumble of light blankets on the bare earth; but if the structure was unpretentious, so much could not be said for the tenant we found within. In the opening chapter of this narrative I have described Starkenden as the ugliest man of my experience. The person he now introduced to us as Ducros was by a long way the most striking and formidable human figure I have ever seen in my life.

DUCROS stood so high that he was obliged to stoop perpetually under the roof of that hut. He must have measured at least six and a half feet, and was broad in proportion, yet in spite of his great bulk he gave me an impression that nowhere upon him was there any flesh. Before we had been in his company many days I had reason to believe that that first impression was correct.

The man was hard bone and sinew, nothing else; and cast iron couldn't have been harder, or stronger. When I shook hands with him my fingers seemed to be suddenly enclosed in a vise of horn, as big as a basket. His features, large, angular and granite-like, were well in tune with his gigantic frame, and he wore a beard that would have rivalled Starkenden's own in luxuriance but for being meticulously pruned into a long, sharp point. That beard was coal-black, and even in the dismal light of the rush-dip it glittered like coal.

Ducros having spread a blanket on the earth, set the lamp in the middle of it and motioned us to sit down. There we sat, or rather squatted, about as queerly assorted a group of gentlemen adventurers, and as queerly circumstanced, as ever foregathered upon this earth. Simbok remained standing outside to give warning of any approach, and the door was shut as closely as it would shut.

"They know," Starkenden said. "And they are discreet men."

"So!" growled Ducros. "I remain in my village and I watch, or sometimes I am out hunting in jungle with Simbok. As

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I come to speak more language I make among natives much inquiry for that country you seek, Estarkenden. A long time all native talk is draw blank or else too much vagueness. But at last there come to my village a native I have not seen the like of him before. He is different face from other native, and lighter skin, and not same speech. This man I think one should call gipsy—he wander the country for ever and not buy buffalo and settle.

"I take him in my compound and I question him close. He is much afraid at mention of that river. I tell him if he not speak out I take him in my hands and I break him in two piece—so! He shiver and sweat and his face which is first color of stale honey is gone white—but he speak out. And although the talk is strange to me, more and more do I understand as he go on. Once, he say, he find that country and go up so high as a waterfall, but he see many small devil among the rock there, and being much terrify he run back to jungle. He run all day, and come to jungle village, and when he tell village men what he has seen they run too—they pack goods and desert that village, driving their cattle south.

"They tell him that river is magic river, and there lives small devils who come down to jungle by night, and do not make noise, and carry off jungle men, and sometimes white men fall in their hands, for they are devil and stronger than any men. That fellow say river is many days' march north of my country, past Big River, past jungle, for it is rock country there. And he tell me what that country look like, as much as he remember. And that is all I get from him, Estarkenden. Yet never I hear word of other savage carrying men off, and I say to myself, truly that is place and those are savages who carry off the brother of Estarkenden. Now I would see the map, my friend. You have still?"

Starkenden opened the pocket of his belt, carefully extracted a leaf of age-yellowed paper, and flattened it out on the blanket. The document was so creased and worn that one would have needed special knowledge to make anything of it at all, and so far as I could see, there had never been a vestige of writing upon it. But Ducros seemed to know what to look for. He cast his eye keenly over the sheet, twisted it once or twice as if to pick up his landmarks, and finally ran his forefinger nail along a pair of parallel lines almost plump across the middle of the paper.

"I think this is the river, Estarkenden?"

The latter nodded. "We always believed so," he said.

"And this ring—it will be lake where that water come over falls. Truly it is as that gipsy native have describe. So! Now that fellow call it place of devil. Your trader who give you this map he say place of gem. Then I say place of devil and place of gem is one and same, *hein?* You agree? So! Now that gipsy native he say many days' march north."

Ducros laid his finger on the bare blanket and began to describe figures there. "So I think my village somewhere here," he continued, "and here is Mekong, no doubt. At first I think best way to find magic river is by going north from my village, and that gipsy native can show way. But now I think much different."

Ducros folded the map and handed it back to Starkenden, who took it, but remained staring hard at Ducros.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You put away that map, Estarkenden," returned Ducros, who was evidently not to be hustled, "and I tell you. But slowly, my friend! I tell my news in order. I send Simbok into Nam Hoa for chance of news. There he hear the daughter of the white man Estarkenden is abduct in the *Tonquinaise* and Estarkenden now in Haiphong offer reward for recapture. He hear also something queer—there is junk seen off this coast some days ago, with white man and woman on board. I say to myself, white man and woman do not sail in Chinese junk by custom. Truly that white man has abduct that white woman, and he hang off shore till dark and then run in. And is not this best place for him to strike, I say?"

"Is it?"

"I think truly so, by dam! That first journey you make to find the river, Estarkenden—you start from Vinh, you tell me?"

"We did."

"And is that route good for travel?"

"Villiancously bad. All swamps."

"Just so, my friend. There is much swamps on this coast north and south. But from here is dry hill running many mile. And this country very lonely also. That is why I choose it for Simbok to meet you. I know this coast, my friends. And I say, truly this Coningham know it as we. He has made land on this coast, by where? Who can say what become of that junk after she is seen off shore? Simbok know she is not in Nam Hoa, or she is spot pretty quick, by dam! There is that notice all

over Nam Hoa, and one hundred men arrest this Coningham for reward if he show his face. Where, then? I sit down and think. I say, is perhaps that junk in this very creek near by? I send Simbok down to look. She is away in other place, truly."

"Are you sure of that?" cried Hope, getting excitedly on to his knees.

Ducros gave him a long, straight look.

"What are you meaning, my friend?" he demanded in surprise.

"This. Some way from the place where we landed, I heard talk. I mentioned it to Crayton—that was the time we stopped, Starkenden, you remember. We thought it must be our own junkmen jabbering, but we were a good distance from their boat by then. What if it was Coningham's?"

DUCROS leapt up and ran out of the hut, where we heard him muttering angrily to Simbok. He then returned, dragging his lieutenant by the shoulder.

"Now you speak out, Simbok!" he cried. "And you speak true, by dam! When you look for that pirate junk in creek, you are sure she is not there, *hein*?"

"*Moi pense* no dere," protested the native sturdily, in his blended pidgin and *petit nègre*. "My look-see all ober cleek, *moi non vois*. My tinkee *longtemps s'en va, M'sieur*."

"She might have gone away and come back since," put in Gregory. "Or she might be staying out at sea all day and running in only at night. Was it by daytime Simbok looked?"

It transpired that Simbok's search *had* been carried out by day.

Starkenden snatched up a rifle. "Coningham may be on board at this moment!" he cried. "In any case those scoundrels know where he is. We must question them!"

Ducros raised his enormous horseshoe eyebrows.

"And you think they tell you, Estarkenden?" he said with half a sneer. "They more likely receive you with much bullets, my friend, and you are good friend to me, too, Estarkenden! I come down to coast and risk my neck for you, and first thing happening you would make battle with some *canaille* of Chinese pirate for information you shall not get! That do not please me, I tell you. I would not have firing on this coast—it bring very soon those dam navy men, which is not good for me. And there is not need, also. That junk she is gone when Simbok search in creek. She perhaps come back and perhaps not. But I do not think this Coningham in her now. I think he is gone far away."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean this, my friend. I tell you just now I come down country alone, and I see few men. But there is one party I see not one day's march from here. I go near enough to see if it is you, but it is not you, so I not go nearer, but lie low until they are past. That party is several native, Estarkenden, and I think one white man, and they carry something I cannot see, for it is amongst those dam native. I do not know of this Coningham then, and I cannot guess what those native carry. Now I have come to coast and hear everything happening, and I know better what that thing is. I think truly it is a litter and the Miss Estarkenden is inside of him!"

Starkenden was staring straight ahead of him with smoldering eyes, while Ducros scanned his face steadily.

"Tell me, my friend," said the latter at length, "has the Miss Estarkenden know of this gem-country you see?"

Starkenden, recalled to himself, nodded. "She knows everything but the news you sent me in your letter," he said.

"And she has look at your map?"

"More than once."

"So!" grunted Ducros, with an accent of grim satisfaction. "It seem to me this Coningham is very sharp scoundrel, by dam! The Miss Estarkenden he force to tell him way to that gem-river, and if he is lucky he find it. But then he meet those devil who live there. It may be he cannot fight them. But he can bargain. He want gem. They want captive. And one fine white girl is worth many time one black jungle woman, by dam!"

Starkenden had sprung erect, his face livid, his great beard bristling with uncontrollable fury.

"Come!" he bellowed.

CHAPTER IV

THE WHITE HEAD IN THE JUNGLE

DUCROS gathered together the blankets and rifles, including his own which he had brought down country on his long lonely march, packed up his small store of food, apportioned loads, put out the light, carefully hid the lamp under the scrub-bush outside the hut, and led the way westward over the hillside.

We followed him, pausing now and again to listen and look all round us; but there

was no sound beyond the occasional start of some creeping thing in the undergrowth, and no light to mitigate the intense blackness of the night. Our advance was necessarily a slow one, but nevertheless a steady, and we must have been already many miles from that solitary hut when, with a startling sudden yellowing of all the eastern heavens, the swift tropical dawn broke. We marched a mile or two more, then halted.

"So!" grunted Ducros, throwing down his bundle and opening a small rucksack of food. "We now eat, my friends, and we get on, for we cannot yet sleep. I have been already too long near coast. Also, this is all my food supplies, and it seem you have not much too. I think you were wiser bringing more food from Haiphong, Estarkenden."

"Then we must move faster than we ever moved before!" cried Starkenden, staring fiercely over the empty hillside.

We divided up the food, and found to our alarm that it amounted to barely two scant meals all round; and water was apparently going to present a graver problem still.

We tramped on and on, seeing not a vestige of man or beast. There was a brief halt in the forenoon, when we ate the meagre remainder of our dried meat and hard millet cakes and took another tantalising sip from Ducros' water-bottle; then, after lying down for a few minutes with topees over our faces, we struggled up and resumed the advance. By about four o'clock Gregory Hope and I were at the end of our endurance, far worse than Starkenden, in whose frail frame there seemed to slumber a surprising reserve of strength which he could summon up when necessary.

Simbok was plodding along in dogged, fatalistic fashion, though he stumbled now and again from sheer exhaustion; and I think the one man among us upon whom the gruelling march had made little impression was Ducros. He appeared to forget, too, in his own inhuman hardness, that it was uncommonly difficult for the rest of us to keep up with his gigantic swinging strides.

At last, when the sun was already on the rim of the heat-shimmering hillside to westward of us, Ducros came to a sudden standstill and dropped on one knee.

"You halt now!" I heard him mutter.

In another instant he had fired. It was not until then that the rest of us, even the hawk-eyed Gregory Hope, so much as sighted Ducros' quarry. Far ahead, something leapt into the air and somersaulted down into the scrub.

Gregory stared at Ducros with mingled amazement and envy, and when he hastened on toward the fallen game I noticed he was stepping out in the fashion of a man measuring distance.

"One hundred and fifty-one yards, Ducros," he cried when he reached it, "and the sun bung in your eyes. That shot was magic!"

Simbok produced an ugly-looking sheath knife—which I imagine had made its way into other than game-flesh before that day—and cut up the slain animal, a small, beautifully marked antelope. The shot was beyond question a miracle of neatness; we found the bullet had struck between shoulder and withers and torn clean through the lungs. Within ten minutes we had several venison steaks broiling over a scrub fire.

Everybody ate ravenously, even Starkenden consuming as much of the savoury flesh as would have gone to a man's normal meal. Ducros then smoked the balance of the meat in a way he said would keep it a month if necessary; we added it to our loads, and hastened forward on the last lap of that day's tremendous march.

The country was altering swiftly now. By nightfall we had worked down to the margin of true jungle, watered by small streams that seemed to meander out of nowhere and lose themselves in shallow marshes.

Ducros and Simbok rapidly threw up a rude hut, cutting long bamboos and broad palm leaves and tough trailers for the purpose; and in the centre of the structure they built a fire.

"You are not seeing this kind of house before, Crayton, *hein?*" said the giant to me. "It is best kind, my friend. Simbok is good jungle man, I tell you. We make here roof of leaf, and that spread out smoke on every side, so if there is enemy near by, he not so likely see. Wild beast also he not often like coming near fire, and he never come near fire that is under roof unless he rage with hunger. And that smoke spreading out he keep away mosquito better than if he go straight on high. In morning, Crayton, we all are smoke-dry, but we are not bite to death, by dam!"

We then arranged a watch, and all except Simbok, who was to stand the first trick, lay down to sleep. And during that first night in the jungle there occurred an incident which, seeing that it bears rather pointedly upon the later phases of this narrative, I am going to recount in some detail.

THE second spell of the watch had been allotted to Ducros, while I was due to relieve him at midnight. Now I happen to be one of those persons who possess the curious power of waking at any hour at will; and it struck me I should do well to try and harness the gift to our interests to-night. Ducros was, after all, no more than human; like the rest of us he had not slept last night at all, and after the great march we had made to-day he might fall asleep at his post, in which case he would fail to wake me, the watch would lapse, and our whole party would lie at the mercy of any attacker, whether he came upon two legs or four.

I had never traveled this interior before, but I knew well enough that the whole peninsula is infested with dangerous wild beasts. And I did *not* know where Coningham was. He might be nearer than we thought, he very possibly had some of the *Tonquinaise* pirates in attendance upon him; and from what I knew of Coningham, I had an unpleasant anticipation of what he would do if he came upon a camp full of his enemies asleep. Altogether, it seemed we should be very ill-advised to relax our vigilance just now. Before lying down, therefore, I told myself with as much determination as I could screw up that I was going to wake at twelve o'clock, exhaustion notwithstanding.

And sure enough I awoke of my own impulse, while the night was still pitch black.

I glanced at a watch I was wearing on my wrist, and saw by the fitful firelight that the time was now five minutes to twelve; I had slept just under four hours. And there were five minutes of repose left to me. Strange how a fierce desire for sleep will magnify the importance of five brief minutes! At the moment I would have given a cargo of merchandise to roll over and sleep again, but I knew that if I did that, and Ducros failed me, I should not awake again; till daybreak. Was Ducros awake? I peered through the bellying smoke to his place at the far corner of the shelter, which was about five yards from where I lay.

Ducros sat half turned away from me, nursing a rifle across his knees, and at first I could have sworn he was dozing. Then I realised he was not. He was staring at something he held in his hand; the fire burned clearer for an instant, and I saw what it was—a small book, which Ducros appeared to be conning over to himself, for his lips moved. This went on for two or three moments more. He then thrust the book into an inner pocket, and drew out from the same receptacle an object that glinted in the dancing light, as a watchface might.

It seemed to me that Ducros was disgusted with his vigil and counting the minutes to the end of it. And yet his face, even at the angle from which I saw it, hardly suggested a weary man watching the clock; his great black brows looked to me to be bunched up, his eyes half closed; as if he were in deep thought.

I gave a low call. In an instant Ducros was on his feet, now very wide awake. He stepped over the sleepers round the fire, and as he did so I noticed he slipped that watch away with a quick gesture, as if he were ashamed to have been caught consulting it.

"I think time for you, Crayton," he said, stooping and shaking my shoulder brusquely. "Are you awake, my friend?"

"Right-oh!" I said.

"You sit up, then. You will sleep if you lie that way. Now, Crayton, you are ready? You are sure you do not sleep again? For if so, I watch rest of this night myself."

"I'll do my share," I said, rather huffily. "What's the trouble?"

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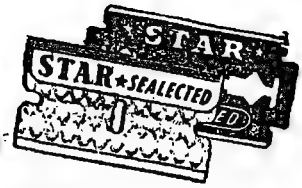

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My vigil lasted only two hours, but it seemed more like two whole nights. And it afforded me an experience that was easily the nerviest I had known up to that time.

At first, but for Ducros' warning, I should scarcely have recognised that curious whining and purring as the note of a tiger on the prowl for prey. It was no more like the noises one hears in a menagerie than the bellow of a domestic ox. And the strangeness added greatly to the terror of it; time and again that sound rose in a slow, menacing crescendo, now in one quarter, now in another; again and again my fretted nerves all but betrayed me into yelling an alarm. I refrained from doing so, however, and I was glad of it afterwards, for the brute never showed himself. All the same, by the end of my watch I was literally on edge, and deadbeat as I had been before, it took me fully an hour to fall asleep after Gregory Hope relieved me as sentry.

We were all up at dawn, and at once set about contriving a rough and ready breakfast; Ducros carved slices from the smoked meat preparatory to toasting them over the fire; Starkenden, true to type, had discovered a wild banana tree near the hut and was shinning up it after the fruit, while Simbok went off to a small jungle stream to get water.

I took out my pocket-handkerchief, the only towel I possessed, and went off to the streams too. Simbok was already at the waterside, dipping two large cups which he had made by most ingeniously folding palm leaves into watertight funnels. I may remark, by the way, that he subsequently boiled water in those leafcups—another jungle trick that astonished me greatly—and that we made tea by dropping a few pinches from Ducros' emergency package.

"Your master great man, Simbok," I observed as innocently as I could, scooping up water with my hands. "How long you with him?"

He gave me a look half uncomprehending, half suspicious.

"Dam great man," he grunted at last, in that curiously independent tone he was accustomed to use to Gregory Hope and me.

"How long you with him?" I repeated.

Simbok stared at me straighter than ever. "*Moi pense* jus' now six-seben day," he said.

"But before that? How long serve him?"

I now heard footsteps behind us, and turned to behold Gregory, who was likewise flourishing a pocket-handkerchief. Simbok glanced at him, then at me. "*Moi non comprends,*" he grunted, moving off.

"Anything up?" said Gregory, kneeling beside the stream and setting to work upon his face and neck.

I related the incident of Ducros' curious preoccupation during the night-watch. "The man stumps me," I said. "There's only one thing I can suggest for him, and that hardly fits in."

"What is it?"

"Convict."

Gregory shook his head. "There's no Devil's Island in these regions that I know of," he said. "And I've an explanation that *does* fit the facts. You remember the military guards at Haiphong? Imagine our big friend in one of their uniforms—see him? I do, clearly." Gregory had risen, and was glancing over his shoulder. "Deserter from the Foreign Legion," he said, sinking his voice to a whisper. "Discipline very unbending in that corps, I believe. If he's seen on the coast he can be shot on sight."

If this conjecture were true it would explain a good deal. But not everything. "The regimental schools must be uncommonly good," I muttered. "I've known Englishmen who couldn't express their meaning in English better than Ducros does. And he's been hiding in a native village for years."

"One thing," whispered Gregory, as we drew near. "We must not pump Simbok. I feel it isn't safe."

NO SOONER had we entered the camp than I had reason to believe Gregory was right. Ducros requested us to get on with our food as quickly as possible, in view of the long march that might be ahead; and in his tone and glance there was more than annoyance over the delay. There was a very palpable suspicion.

On getting off from the camping ground we struck northward for two or three miles. Here the jungle thinned out

markedly, and we found without difficulty the track Ducros had himself followed on his way down to the coast; from him we learned also that if Coningham had indeed gone inland, this was practically certain to be the route he had taken, since there was denser jungle both to north and south of it. We therefore elected to follow up this track for at least one day; then, if we had gathered no tidings of the fugitives, to hark back towards the coast for a fresh start. As it turned out, we had definite and unmistakable news of our quarry before high noon.

We reached a hamlet occupied by very primitive natives, and questioned them. At first they professed blank ignorance even of what was being asked, but when Starkenden produced some tical silver he had got in exchange for French notes at Haiphong, they evinced more sign of comprehension. A little later still, Starkenden had extracted from them everything he wanted. A white man with a party of natives bearing a litter had passed through that village several days before. The natives were not Chinese, but men of this country. The litter was made of smooth wooden poles and cloth built up with bamboo and leaves, so that nobody could see inside it. The party also went swiftly.

From this information, which Starkenden translated to us as we hurried on—he had gained considerable knowledge of native dialects on his former expeditions—one or two facts seemed clear. The white man could be none other than Coningham. He must have sent the Chinese pirates back to the coast and engaged a body of natives here inland to take their place, though still apparently using a litter made of spar and sail from the pirate junk. And from the closed-in litter, and the fact that these villagers protested complete ignorance until they saw Starkenden's silver, it was tolerably plain that Coningham anticipated pursuit and had determined to cover up his tracks.

We pressed forward for many days, through a wonderfully varied stretch of country. Now our route lay over hills almost as dry and sterile as the big ridge we had crossed when we struck in from the coast, now we were following a pass between mountains densely wooded to their summits with magnificent timber, now again the land would sink to a broad belt of alluvial plain, threaded by small streams and filled to its limits with the luxuriant atap palm and breadfruit and *jak* of tropical jungle. The travel-incidents of these days do not bear greatly on the story I am telling, and I am not going to recount them. Day after day we made swift marches from dawn till dark, and whenever we found natives, Starkenden employed the method of tical silver to extract information from them. Seldom did this fail to make the natives speak, and seldom did we draw blank. As a rule, Starkenden translated to Gregory and me the news he had obtained; a certain item, however, he never retailed at all, and but for Simbok we should have remained in ignorance of it. The incident was a curious one.

Starkenden was cross-examining some villagers on the line of advance one day, when they said something which set him tottering where he stood, like a man who has received a blow. He recovered himself almost immediately, however, and the march proceeded. I heard Gregory Hope ask our leader what the natives had said, but he ignored the question and stalked on, with that curiously menacing, catlike gait, his great hairy chin thrust forward and his eyes full of dull, savage hate. I knew from the look of him that when we came up with Coningham, if ever we did, Starkenden would have one thought—to kill, and kill quickly.

As we drew farther and farther westward we entered a region of pure uninterrupted jungle, which I fancy only Ducros and Simbok among us knew. It may be that Starkenden had travelled this way at some time or other of his former wanderings, but with a swift growth and ever-changing contour of the jungle he appeared to recognise no more than the occasional village clearings, which looked presumably much the same today as when he had last seen them. The Frenchman and his lieutenant, however, had been here recently, for we were still on the direct line between Ducros' hidden fastness and the coast.

Then, still working entirely on reports received from natives, we struck off that route sharply to the northward. We were by this time hot upon the trail of the fugitives, though never hot enough; whenever we got news of them the story was always "three days past" "or four days gone," and strive as we might we could not lessen the lead they had of us. Moreover, many reports now came to us of a *white woman* carried in a litter. Coningham evidently troubled about secrecy no longer, but was trusting wholly to speed; and from the way he outdistanced our utmost efforts to

come up with him, we were driven to conclude he must be using relay after relay of native bearers for the purpose.

Then occurred something which brought us to a sudden halt, and that in about as startling a fashion as could well be conceived.

One hot steamy forenoon we were threading our way through the jungle and came out at last into a sort of long aisle between the over-arching trees. I was leading at the time, and had hardly entered this glade when I saw, at some distance along it, a man in white European-cut cottons and topee. Immediately darting in behind a tree-trunk, I looked back. Ducros and Simbok had disappeared. Starkenden and Gregory Hope were close behind. They must have seen from my face what was afoot, for they took cover in a flash. I peered out from my hiding-place, to where the stranger stood. His back was towards me, but the broad sun-helmet was tilted forward, and I saw that the hair of his head was of a pure, silvery white.

I STOOD there quivering from head to foot with excitement. There were swift light steps behind me, the sound of a rifle being cocked, and an agitated breathing that drew nearer by sudden starts. Starkenden was coming forward from tree to tree. He reached mine, pushed his way to the front, slid his hand up to the trigger-guard of his rifle, and remained fingering it in a way that set my heart pounding afresh. I had never been present at a deliberate killing before.

My gorge rose at it—I could not stand by and see the thing done. I reached out a hand to knock down the barrel which was coming up to the aim, but at that instant it fell of its own accord. Starkenden gave a queer grunt, as a person might in whom some great tension had been suddenly loosed, and when I peered forward over his shoulder I knew the reason. The stranger had turned his face full towards us. He was not our man.

The stranger was now coming towards us, a rifle under one arm. As we stepped out into the open he gave a slight start, but regained his composure at once and approached with surprising nonchalance for a man who had suddenly lit upon three strange white men. Generally speaking, I imagine white men were not much likelier to be encountered in this region than snowflakes.

"Morning, gentleman," he said, raising his topee. "And welcome to the locality. But—why—this is an unexpected pleasure, with a vengeance; Mr.—let me think, now—Mr. Starkenden, I believe I have the honor to address, hey?"

Starkenden stared at the man as if his eyes would drop out of his head. I fancied from his expression, too, that he was cursing as much as marveling at the mistake which had betrayed us into this meeting at all.

"That is my name, sir," he said at last, "though I do not quite see how you came to be apprised of the fact."

"Ha, that so? Well, my memory is better than yours. However, come along to my little hostelry and rest. You must be tired men."

He turned without another word and led the way through the glade.

Starkenden glanced swiftly all around us. "This means delay," he muttered, "and we cannot afford delay. We—"

"It'll look queer if we bunk, anyway," replied Gregory under his breath, "and it might lead to complications. This man may have news, too."

Starkenden remained undecided for another moment, then went forward, though still looking anything but comfortable. "Caution!" he muttered again. "Ducros may have recognised this man. Leave all the talking to me."

It had not occurred to the stranger to doubt whether we should accept his invitation. Without once turning round he walked on in silence to a hut of native pattern, manifestly just thrown up; the cut bamboo was still moist and juicy at the ends, the roughly thatched roof gave out that very distinctive and penetrating scent of bruised tropical foliage.

"I am sorry the chairs are not ready yet," he laughed, as he reached the structure and strode inside. "I had some difficulty in making the folk of these parts understand what a chair was. They are gone out for the material now. Well, Mr. Starkenden, let me recall to your memory where I met you before. The *Reine de Saba* Hotel, Saigon, sixteen years back. Am I right?"

Starkenden drew his head back sharply.

"You have a long memory, sir," he said.

"You were staying there with your brother, I believe. I couldn't well mistake the time, for I had newly arrived in the country with my wife—since dead, alas. As for remembering your face, I've been committing faces to memory all my life, native faces mostly, and they're a heap harder to

remember than European. My name is Israel Berrows, sir."

"Ah, yes, I recall the meeting now. And what are you doing in this remote corner of the world? Have you been here long?"

"About an hour and a half, sir. I could wish it were longer, for then I should have had an older-established rest-house to offer you."

"You have never been here before?"

"Never in this exact region. It is a bit northerly for me."

"But have you been in the country ever since I saw you last?"

"Every day since, sir!"

"And you build a house wherever you go?"

"Why not, sir? It's worth a few brass cartridge cases to have a habitation ready for me when I come. Beside that, it gives the native folk a sort of assurance I *shall* come again, and helps them, I hope and believe, to remember something of what I have already imparted. In this way, roaming continually, I cover more ground, do you see?—and make up a little for the sad numerical inferiority of missionaries of our church. But what brings you up country again, Mr. Starkenden?"

"I am looking for my brother," said Starkenden simply.

The missionary started. "Ah!" he cried. "Now that must have been what made you stick in my memory so. Wasn't it your brother who disappeared in this country—some time after I saw you before?"

"That is correct. You heard the circumstances of his disappearance?"

"Never in detail."

"WE WERE on a trading expedition, and when the tragedy occurred I really do not think we could have been far from this very spot. One night a band of savages attacked us. I was knocked over the head and stunned, only escaping through the devotion of a native servant who picked me up and ran off with me. My brother, apparently, was overpowered and made prisoner. When I was able to get help I searched the whole country, and I have searched it since, but without finding any trace of him."

Berrows was eyeing us with slightly lifted brows. "You're a small party to tackle a tribe of savages," he remarked. "Couldn't you get help from the French military?"

"Quite hopeless," replied Starkenden. "The authorities lent me troops in the past, but they have long been convinced my brother is dead and that I am mad to search any longer. Yet I am not mad, Berrows. Nor am I so foolhardy as to expect to fight a tribe of savages with only two helpers. What we are doing now is to seek for information. Should we discover anything definite about my brother's whereabouts, we shall return at once to the coast and inform the French authorities. They will hardly refuse me assistance then."

"It's a very odd coincidence," mused Berrows—"that I should run up against you while you are making this search. Because, you see, I too have heard tales of a mysterious tribe of savages in this region."

Starkenden looked up quickly.

"From whom?" he demanded.

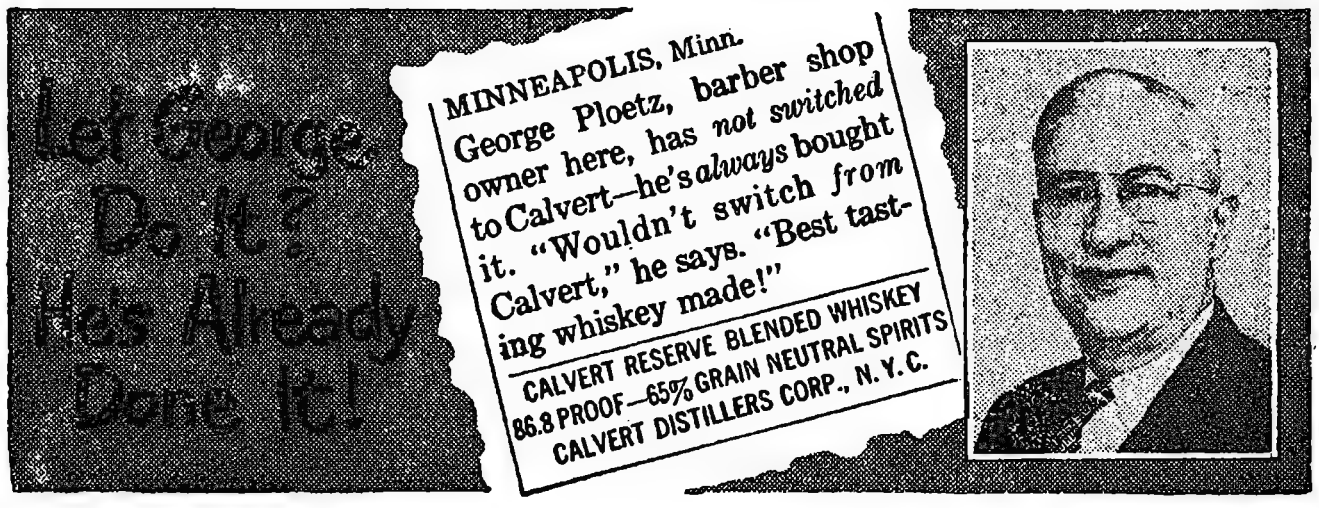
"From jungle-folk only—never heard the story from any white man."

"What did you hear?"

"Nothing that could help your search much, I am afraid. I've always noticed the jungle-folk were very shy of talking on the subject at all, too."

"Have you any idea of the reason of that?"

"Well, it's extremely difficult to get at what these people mean, but of one thing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I can be pretty certain. When they mentioned those mysterious savages the word they used was not the word for men, but *devils*. That was it—*small devils of the hill country, who come down and carry off men.*"

"You never heard, Berrows, of a white man being carried off by them?"

"Never one word. Yet I can't help thinking, Starkenden, that the savages who carried off your brother and the *devils* I've heard speak of must be one tribe. But come now, I see my little flock have prepared some food. Let me beg of you to join me."

We squatted on the leaf-strewn floor of Berrows' rest-house and fell to upon a meal of rice and wild banana the natives laid before us in large dried gourds. Berrows ate for a moment or two in silence.

"By the way," he said at last, "talking of white men, I *did* come across news of one only a week or two back, and under rather odd circumstances, too. I was passing through some jungle country I had never used before, about a hundred and fifty miles south, I should say, of where we are now. It was several days south of the Big River, at all events. The locality was particularly dense and wild, and I lost my way.

"In the end I fetched up at a village that struck me as being a heap better laid out and cared for than most native villages, but the inhabitants were unusually hostile and suspicious. They told me to go away to where I came from. It was in vain for me to ask if there were any sick men in the village. All I could get from them was that their chief was a great chief, who would certainly kill me if he came back and found me in the village."

"Yes?" Starkenden's voice sounded with an eagerness that I thought must arouse the missionary's suspicions, yet he sailed on without appearing to notice anything amiss.

"Well, gentlemen, I've lived amongst tigers and wild elephants long enough now to have found out that I'm not a coward. But I didn't see the advantage of raising trouble in that village to no purpose, so I left a message for the great chief I'd be honored to meet him some other time when I was along that way, and cleared out. I went north a mile or two, built myself a hut and a fire, and lay down to sleep.

"In the night I was awakened by a native. It turned out to be a woman of that village I had just left. She was in considerable of a fright, and first of all implored me not to tell the other villagers she had followed me. When I had given her my word not to do that, she asked me how long I had been in that neighborhood. I said the best part of a week, which was quite true—I'd been wandering up and down the country hoping to strike a village. This statement put her in a worse scare than ever, and she tried to run away.

"But my curiosity was aroused. I caught the woman by the arm and asked her what was the matter. She then began to spin a regular cock-and-bull yarn, of which I could make very little. She said the great chief of the village often went out hunting with his servant, but the servant was already gone away and now, only three days ago, the chief himself had departed, suddenly and without taking any beaters. The belief in the village, apparently, was that I was a devil who had laid a spell over them all and spirited away the great chief, with a view to taking possession of the village myself; hence their suspicion and hostility when I appeared there. The woman was charmingly frank. She didn't think I was a devil, but admitted sharing the common view that I had spirited away the chief, and if so, she entreated me to bring him back by reversing the magic. The natives of these parts look upon my medicine chest as strong magic, you know.

"Well, one has to humor these simple children. God forgive me, I told the woman that far from having spirited away the great chief I would use my influence to bring him back, if ever it were possible to me. She then returned to the village, but before she went I learned from her that she was the chief's wife, had borne him five children, and that there were several other wives. That rather upset my suspicion that the said great chief was a white man."

"What gave you that suspicion?" put in Starkenden, again with ill-disguised eagerness.

"Why, sir, as I was leaving the village, a puff of wind blew aside the bead curtain of what appeared to be the principal residence, and unless my eyes played me a trick, there were chairs in that house cut to European pattern. And if any native in this interior uses European chairs, I've yet to come across that native. They squat on the floor as we're doing now, you know, chiefs and headmen and villagers alike."

"H'm. A very curious locality, Berrows," observed Starkenden at length, "and highly superstitious inhabitants, I should say.

It would be interesting to know who their great chief actually is. What are your present movements, by the way?"

"I don't anticipate remaining here long. So far as I know, this country is about on the edge of inhabited regions. And my work lies, of course, in places where there are human sicknesses to cure and souls to save. I shall go south again."

ABOUT an hour later we left the missionary in his lonely jungle halt, and hurried on.

"But for circumstances against it I should have invited Berrows to join forces with us," Starkenden said. "But it would not do. We already have Ducros."

"I shouldn't imagine he and Berrows would harmonise at all well," remarked Gregory drily.

"They would not," assented Starkenden, missing the irony in Gregory's words. "Ducros has a rooted mistrust of all missionaries—they penetrate the country too deeply for his liking. He is obviously suspicious now. And if he knew that this Berrows had accidentally stumbled on his hiding place, Ducros would be a great deal more suspicious still."

"You think that was it?"

"I am perfectly convinced. It is too much to suppose that there are two white men ruling over native communities in this interior. But remember, Ducros must hear nothing."

"Don't you think he would rather welcome the hint that his retreat was discovered?"

"I do!" said Starkenden grimly. "And I fear he would act on the hint without delay. He would go back and render Berrows eternally incapable of any indiscreet betrayal of that hiding place. I know more of Ducros' past than you do, Hope. He is not a scrupulous man. It is fortunate for us that I have made it worth his while to be on our side. Now we must pick up Ducros again. He will not be very far off."

In less than an hour we were rejoined by Simbok and the Frenchman, who had been prowling within hail all the time but refrained from revealing themselves until it was quite clear we had left Berrows behind. Ducros was even more suspicious than Starkenden had anticipated he would be. I could only conclude that he must have actually seen Berrows in the vicinity of his hiding place some time before, and recognized him today. He asked many questions about the missionary's recent movements, and at last demanded point blank whether Berrows knew anything of his village. Starkenden replied, without turning a hair, that Berrows had made no mention of any such place.

"He has not seen this Coningham, too?"

"He has not. Berrows had only just reached the place where we found him. Coningham must have passed through it long before—if indeed he has passed this way at all."

"So! Now we get on quick, my friends, away from these damn busybody *missionaries*. We go north, I think, and cast round for trail, *hein?*"

By about four in the afternoon we were passing through a region where the jungle was thinner than we had known it for days past, when Starkenden suddenly halted, staring at something through the trees away to the eastward. He whipped out the small folding telescope he carried, levelling it in the same direction, and an instant later had torn open his clothing and produced Royce's map from the pocket in his belt.

"It may be the same," I heard him mutter to himself. "It *must* be the same."

"What is it, my friend?" queried Ducros, stooping to look over his shoulder.

"This!" cried Starkenden, as he laid his thumb on a mark at the edge of the creased paper.

We were now all gathered round and staring at the mark. It was a rough pencil scrawl, but even without literal indication there could be no doubt what it had been intended to represent.

"Royce marked a tree," continued Starkenden. "He would not have done that unless it was a tree that could be easily recognised. And the only feature by which any one tree could be recognised in a region like this is its size. Some outstanding tree, gentlemen. Now follow the direction of my arm—there!"

Trees of a dozen varieties were all round us, but through their branches we could see clearly enough the one Starkenden meant; while the trunk was not visible from where we stood, the upper foliage was, and there could be no doubt that it was an outstanding tree indeed. It must have been fully a mile away to the east, yet even at that distance it stood out from its fellows, and as we drew near we saw that it dwarfed every other growth for miles around.

A few minutes later we were under the tree itself, peering up through its enormous network of branches. It was a huge

jak, greater by far than any other *jak* of my experience. It could not have measured much short of two hundred feet.

"If this is the tree Royce marked," said Starkenden, his rumbling voice shaken with excitement, "we should now be within striking distance of the gem river. Coningham is making for that river. But we have lost his trail and cannot hope to pick it up again. Therefore, our best policy will be to look for the river, not for Coningham. We must have gained on him considerably during the past four days—we may get to the river first."

"That sound very well, Estarkenden," retorted Ducros, "but where is that river, *hein?*"

Starkenden stared impatiently all around him. "We do not *know*, of course, he said. "Therefore we must find out. There is evidently not much to be gathered from the ground level. But if I could get to the top of this tree—"

It looked a formidable task. The stem of the *jak* was fully six feet in diameter; the first bough stood out from the trunk at about twenty feet from the ground, and it was a good deal higher still that the branches began to occur at all close together.

SIMBOK hurried off back into the denser jungle behind us. He returned about ten minutes later with a huge armful of creeper, upon which Ducros and he at once set to work, plaiting and twisting; and in surprisingly short time the whole of that creeper had been resolved into a slender, neat-looking rope. Ducros threw it up over the first bough of the *jak*, and swung his weight upon it. To my utter astonishment, the rope held.

With the help of his pocket compass—that same curious old relic he had shown Gregory and me the night we left Yokohama—Starkenden marked on the earth a big cross indicating the cardinal points.

"Now," he continued, "as you see, Royce neglected to mark north and south on the map. He also gives no scale, but to the best of my recollection he said he had drawn the map on a fairly large scale. If that is so, and if this is indeed the tree he marked, some of those other features may be visible with the help of the glass. I shall go to the top of this tree and see if they are. You have a pencil, Hope? Right. Listen carefully to the directions I call down."

Starkenden then addressed himself to the task of climbing the *jak*, going up hand over fist. For a moment or two I could hardly forbear to laugh at the figure he cut, but that feeling rapidly gave place to admiration for his courage and skill. He was astraddle of the first branch in a few seconds; from that point he drew up the creeper rope, tossed it over the next bough, and was soon lost to view amongst the upper foliage. For some time now there were fitful rustlings that grew fainter and fainter, then silence. Finally Starkenden's voice came down to us in a distant rumbling growl—and an excited one.

"A few miles north," we heard him say, "the jungle thins out. Beyond is a belt of country that looks like bare rock. The farthest I can see in that direction is a low range of hills. It may be the herringbone line half way across the map. Have you got it?"

"Yes."

"The hills appear to run east and west, but to bend round south a good deal at the western extremity. Does that agree?"

"Yes."

"Lay a rifle barrel out along your east-and-west line on the ground. Have you done that?"

"Yes."

"Now hold the map so that the straightest portion of that herringbone line is immediately under the edge of the rifle barrel—but see that the mark for this tree is *south* of the line."

"Right."

The foliage far above our heads rustled again, and in a few moments Starkenden was amongst us, literally dancing with eagerness. He snatched the pencil from Gregory Hope, laid his compass on the map and with the help of another rifle barrel dotted out a line.

"This is undoubtedly the tree Royce marked," he cried. "And yonder is the river he found. There is a dint in that flat line of hills—it must be the place where the water comes through. But this is our course—" he indicated the line he had just dotted out—"and this is the point we make for. The only thing I cannot be certain of is the distance. It looks almost due east of the lake, but it may be considerably this side of it."

"What is this thing, Estarkenden?" demanded Ducros, who had knelt beside him and was intently scanning the paper.

Starkenden laid the pencil-point grimly upon it and described a small spiral.

"Unless I am very greatly mistaken," he said, *"above that spot is the smoke of a fire."*

CHAPTER V

ON THE EDGE OF THE UNKNOWN

DUCROS climbed the *jak*, not so swiftly as Starkenden had done, though little less neatly, and remained in the tree-top for several minutes.

"I think truly there is fire," he said when he had descended. "And that is not inhabited regions, my friends. It is campfire of some person."

"How far off do you think that smoke is, Ducros?"

The giant stroked his beard and puckered his brows.

"So!" he muttered. "It is not easy judging, Estarkenden, for atmosphere in this country is not same clearness always. Yet I have seen that smoke with bare eyes, and I say he is perhaps twenty miles, and perhaps only fifteen. And there is one other thing I see when I look with spy-glass. That smoke has become more, and that mean those men who make fire have add more wood. And they are not doing that except to camp for night, by dam!"

"We must go on," cried Starkenden. "We should be there before midnight!"

"I think good!" assented Ducros.

We laid a course direct for that distant campfire, and set out, the weariness of a long day's march forgotten in anticipation of the coming fight—for the upshot could scarcely be anything else. Ducros undoubtedly thought so, and appeared to view the prospect with keen relish, while Starkenden glided swiftly ahead like a panther on a scent. For a while all went well. We were soon out of the jungle, ascending a slant of open prairie-like land; then that came to an abrupt end, and we were into the rock country Starkenden had seen from the top of the *jak*. It was at this stage of the march that the tropic night crashed down upon us with all its stunning suddenness.

In the light of what I know now, that night dash seems to me to be about the wildest and foolhardiest move we made during the whole adventure. There was no moon, and I doubt whether any man of us was equal to following a course by the heavens; nor, in our feverish haste, did we trouble to try. We worked entirely on periodic consultations with Starkenden's compass, conducted by matchlight, and I believe that at the beginning of the dash we had all expected to reach Coningham's camp fire—if it was indeed his—within a few hours.

As the night advanced we steadily lost that hope. At last, by about four o'clock, when according to our calculations we should have been within sight of the actual flame of that campfire, we halted on the crest of a small hillock. Peering in every direction we could see nothing but pitch black night around us and the feeble, unfamiliar stars overhead. All of us expect the cast-iron Ducros, also, were dead-beat, to say nothing of the cuts and bruises we had sustained in our frequent tumbles down the short, steep slants; and even Ducros seemed to have reconsidered his views on the advantages of a night march.

"This I think no good, Estarkenden," he said. "There is not man alive can work this country by dark. I think we wait for day."

There was certainly nothing else to be done. We descended to the bottom of a ravine and lay down, huddling together under the few blankets we had with us. After the close, steamy heat of the jungle it was bitterly cold on this higher ground; not a man amongst us could have slept, and the wait till daybreak seemed ten times what it actally was—about two

hours. Then dawn rose as suddenly as night had fallen.

Starkenden struggled out of the blankets, shook himself, and ran back to the crest of the hillock. I saw him levelling his pocket-glass this way and that, saw the great matted beard wag, as if he were muttering to himself; but it was not until we had all joined him and examined the country for ourselves that we realised to the full how hopelessly we must have strayed.

On the skyline to the north of us was a high ridge, visible to the naked eye and evidently the range of hills which Starkenden had espied from the top of the *jak* tree, yet while one or two isolated peaks stood out, we could see no dint such as Starkenden had described. The ridge rose up like a huge unbroken wall, frowning and forbidding. For miles around us extended a waste of sharp bluffs and steep ravines, totally devoid of vegetation; most bewildering of all, however, was the fact that we could not even be certain where we had emerged from the jungle. Back to the southward, now a great way off, lay a level bank of trees, their upper foliage tinged with red gold in the rays of the still low sun; the gigantic *jak* had disappeared.

For several moments we blankly stared, at a loss to surmise what had happened. Then Gregory Hope raised a sharp cry.

"Jimminy!" he gasped. "Is that it—look!"

There was a tree that stood out noticeably from the rest, but that tree was far away to the southeast.

Starkenden scanned the country all round with his telescope, finally bringing it to rest on a distant point a little north of the sunrise.

"I imagine that is where the lake lies, at all events," he said. "There is a curious shimmering of the air above it—possibly the reflection from water. Can you see?"

Ducros took the glass and looked, but shook his head decidedly. "I think truly you imagine that, Estarkenden," he said. "Do you see, Hope and Crayton?"

We had both to confess we could see no difference between the air in that direction and the air in any other.

"It should be the lake," insisted Starkenden, "and if we lay a course to it by compass from here, we ought to strike it without difficulty."

Ducros shrugged his enormous shoulders.

"I think better to aim for large point than small one, Estarkenden. You say make for lake. *I* say go north. We cannot miss those hill. Then we follow him along—is not that shortest way in long run, *hein?*"

WE ADOPTED this plan forthwith, and made a day's march to the north. It was villainous bad going over every inch of the way—and a long way at that. Ducros had greatly underestimated the distance to that campfire, but he had been right enough when he hazarded that the country would become rougher towards the hills; not only was it cut up into endless ravines, the slants were often covered with sharp loose rock that began to slide like a veritable avalanche when once it was disturbed, and down we went with it. We pressed on, however, and by sunset were within a mile or two of the mountain range, which we now saw taking the form of a gigantic cliff, apparently sheer, as if built by some titan of the past to bar all access to the country beyond. We bivouacked again in the bed of a defile and slept through the night, cold though it was, for most of us were now at the pitch of fatigue when we could barely stand, let alone travel.

Followed another gruelling day of scrambles and tumbles across the rocky wilderness. It was at early afternoon of this day that we heard a most curious booming noise in the distance. We concluded this must be the roar of water bursting through the cliff, yet the strange feature of it was that although we tramped for hours in the direction of the sound, it grew no louder, but kept steadily on in a dull, hollow drone. Our ultimate discovery of that water came very suddenly.

We had drawn close to the foot of the cliff, which rose vertically out of the wilderness of gullies and crags to a height I should judge at fully five hundred feet. It was a limestone formation, weathered on the surface to a dirty white, and astonishingly smooth and regular. Working along the base of this enormous natural rampart we came finally to a broad depression that ran down from the cliff, something after the fashion of a fluting in the pedestal of a monument. The bed was boulder-strewn, and the channel had evidently been cut out by the action of water in centuries past, but it was quite dry now, and after about half an hour of hard work we had crossed it and were clambering up the far side. Then at last that curious drone swelled to a roar; a fine spray fell on our faces; we gained the crest of the ridge, and

all the secret of this strange region was revealed to us in one stroke of the eye.

The ridge we had just ascended proved to be the bank of a large lake, held in this goblet-like rim of rock to a level very considerably above that of the surrounding wilderness. On our left hand the cliff was split almost to its base by a gap shaped like a sharp-pointed V, and through that gap the water was bursting which caused the hollow drone we had heard so far off: apparently the flat face of the cliff acted as a sort of gigantic sounding-board and projected the noise to a great distance.

On all sides except at the northern and southern ends the lake was encircled by a bank like the one upon which we stood. The northern break was that V-shaped fissure in the cliff, while far away on our right hand, that is, toward the south, the rim of the lake was broken up into a wide causeway of boulders through which the water burst in foam and disappeared.

Starkenden searched the whole locality with his glass. "This is the dint I saw from the top of the *jak,* undoubtedly," he said. "But that fire was east of it—it must have been on the other side of the lake."

Ducros was staring keenly across. "There is no fire now, Estarkenden. Yet it may be there is fire-ash still, and we find him. But first we are to find way over this water—it seem to me he come inconvenient for us, by dam!"

A very brief investigation was sufficient to convince us that there was no passage across the lake at its upper end. The elevated rim swept round to the foot of the cliff in a broad curve, meeting it at a point not far short of the V-shaped fissure. This now appeared as a great gloomy chasm, but from the nearest we could get we were still at an angle to the gap, and could see only a few yards into it.

What we were able to see clearly enough was that the outflowing water came through like an exaggerated millrace and completely filled the steep-sided channel. We then harked round to the southern end of the basin. Here again we were brought up standing, this time against the falls, or rather rapids—for the lake water escaped over a slant of huge worn boulders several hundred yards wide, and made its way down country in a river whose course we could follow for miles away to the south-east, to a point where dun rock left off and a green region began.

Above that green region, moreover, there hovered a most curious and wide-spread haze, which Starkenden scanned with his glass for several moments.

"It is as I thought!" he ejaculated at last. "I begin to see, gentlemen, why this river is so little known. It loses itself in that country."

"But what's the smoke?" queried Gregory.

"Not smoke at all, but flocks of birds. There appears to be a vast swamp. Coningham could not have crossed down there, and he could not have crossed here. There must be a passage somewhere between. Come, let us find it."

It was not until we had skirted the watercourse for fully a mile down that we found a practicable crossing. Here the wide river widened yet more, and was split into innumerable smaller channels which it seemed an active man might jump. We were still trying up and down for the safest passage when Gregory Hope suddenly raised an eager shout. He stood on a patch of sandy soil near the water's edge, beckoning to us.

"Tread carefully!" he cried as we ran up. "Now, what's that?"

It was a small dint in the soil, semicircular in shape, the flat side slightly concave. There were many other marks round it, confused and half-obliterated footprints apparently, but this one had survived no doubt because it was deeper. It had been made by the heel of a shoe—such shoes as are worn by European women.

Starkenden stared at it with grim, smouldering eyes.

"She has descended from the litter," he muttered. "They could not carry that across, but they could cross on foot. And what they could do we can do."

THE next moment we had set out across that causeway of boulders, Starkenden leading. At first the gaps were so small they could be stepped in a good stride, but that condition of affairs came to an end all too soon. Before we had advanced fifty yards we were obliged to leap. Still the gaps lengthened, and through these larger and deeper central outlets the river was sweeping with terrific force and roaring at such a pitch that we had to shout to make one another hear. Worse still, so much spray arose that the smooth, water-worn boulders were all, even the flattest of them, dangerously slippery underfoot.

We came at length to a gap wider by half than any we had passed before. It must have been at least sixteen feet across,

and the take-off was from a round-domed rock that could hardly have measured nine. One by one we got on to this precarious platform, and stood there huddled together, uneasily scanning a similar rock on the far side.

"How in Hades could they have got a woman across here?" shouted Gregory Hope.

"They made a bridge of that litter, of course," Starkenden shouted back impatiently. "We are not so fortunate. We must jump."

Ducros nodded, and stooped and began unstrapping our bundle of blankets. Over the surface of the rock he spread out one of these, which materially improved the foothold on our side—that was all. I could scarcely look at the glistening rock beyond, and the roaring torrent between, without a shudder.

"That is best I can do for you yet, my friends," bellowed Ducros, searching our faces with a dry, unflattering stare. "Do I go first to show you the way?"

Starkenden motioned him to one side, measured the distance with his eye, then laid down his rifle at the back of the taking-off rock and made two or three swift strides towards the brink. In another instant he had shot into the air as if from a catapult, landing cleanly and safely. It was an amazingly good leap.

Ducros grimly clapped his enormous palms together, detached another blanket from the heap and tossed it across to Starkenden, who spread it out on the rock that side. Gregory Hope was the next to cross. His jump was nothing near so neat as Starkenden's, but he alighted on the farther blanket with a few inches to spare and scrambled to his feet without assistance. Then came my turn. It was well for me I was the third jumper and not the first; but for those two others who had gone before I should undoubtedly have come to a swift and ghastly end somewhere farther down that raging stream.

As I pitched on the blanketed rock one of my feet slid off it, and before I knew where I was, both my legs had been wrenched round and were trailing thigh-deep in a torrent that seemed it would tear my very boots off. As it was, the sudden jerk well nigh pulled Hope and Starkenden into the water with me. They kept the grip they had taken of my wrists, however, and flung their whole weight into the opposite scale; and after a short fierce struggle had the satisfaction of seeing me landed on the rock, breathless and scared out of my wits, but at least for the moment safe.

The spectacle of this mishap was not without its effect upon Simbok. He began jabbering to Ducros, and made violent gestures, pointing from the blanket under his feet to the far side where we stood waiting. Ducros heard him out, then turned to us.

"You listen, you all!" he bellowed. "Simbok is not good jumping river. He think better I throw him across. I think too. First I send these blanket, which you spread double, my friends. And when I throw Simbok, you catch him!"

We had soon padded up a landing place as Ducros directed. Then Ducros gripped Simbok by the waist, lifted him off his feet as if he had been a sack of shavings, gave the limp body a tentative swing or two and hurled it across the chasm.

"So!" bawled Ducros across the torrent. "I now throw rifle and bundle, and you take them on to next rock, for when I come there is not much room, by dam!"

Again we carried out his instructions. Ducros then leapt the chasm himself, sailing over like a monstrous eagle with wings outspread; and five minutes later we were all on dry rock at the eastern margin of the watercourse.

WE NOW ascended a long slant strewn with great boulders like the natural causeway we had just crossed. They were all smooth and water-worn, these tremendous rocks, and it was evident that at some seasons of the year the outfall at this end of the lake was considerably wider than at present. We picked a way cautiously from cover to cover, looking well ahead before we took each next step, for we must now be nearing the site of that camp. No sign of the campers appeared, however, and it took us over an hour to find even the ashes of the fire.

Little wonder that we had seen no light from it during our ill-fated night march; even had the farther bank of the lake not lain between—which I fancy it did. The fire had been built in the midst of a ring of boulders fully eight feet high, and would not have been visible from a few hundred yards off. And beyond that heap of cold ashes, not a vestige of their occupation had the fugitives left.

We were obliged to camp now, for night was upon us, and we had come to grasp the unwisdom of trying to negotiate this country in the dark. By this time our blood must have thickened up by reason of our two bitter sojourns among the

rocks, and we slept well enough till daybreak, each man in turn standing sentinel as had been our practice from the beginning of the march. We then ate a cheerless breakfast of dried meat, and Starkenden called a council of war. He spread out his map upon a flat stone, while we gathered round on our knees.

"Coningham has been here, gentlemen," he began briskly, "but is here no longer. It remains for us to find where he has gone. That scoundrel's motive in carrying off my daughter is quite clear now.

"My daughter knew of this river and had more than once seen the map and had it explained to her. Coningham—by some means that I cannot yet fathom—has got her under his domination and forced her to tell all she knew, and from her guidance he has been lucky enough to find a way here. Thus he achieves the double purpose of wreaking his hatred upon me and discovering the gem-river for himself. That river yonder is undoubtedly the one marked on my map. But Royce distinctly told my brother and me that he had reached the course of the river *through* the cliff. What can that mean? Nothing but a bird could get through that gap now. Obviously, there must be another way."

"Perhaps not so much obvious, Estarkenden," put in Ducros. "It may be Royce come in very dry season when stream is low, and there is dry rock at side where he can climb up."

"That is possible. But there is certainly no margin now. So Coningham cannot have vanished that way. Nor down country either, you may depend. He would not retreat with the river of gems actually before him. Therefore he has gone up over those cliffs."

"You kill this Coningham, Estarkenden?" inquired Ducros casually. "So! I do not interfere. But I help something already, I think. And what is my reward?"

Starkenden frowned, his face working in a most curious fashion. For a moment he was uncomfortably silent. Then an idea seemed to strike him.

"Crayton," he said to me, "do you recollect what I told you when I first broached the subject of this expedition—as to your share of profits?"

"Certainly," I said. "My share was to be twenty-five per cent."

Starkenden turned again to the giant. "You hear, Ducros?" he said. "Twenty-five percent is one quarter. There are four of us white men—four including you. I had banked on your joining this expedition when I came south and found you. Could you suppose that I should expect you *not* to share and share alike?"

"So!" declared Ducros, with palpable relief. "I see you are also true friend to me, Estarkenden. Now we catch up this Coningham."

A MINUTE later the search was in full swing. We had distributed our forces along several hundred yards of the cliff face, each man taking a reach and scanning it for any sign of a gentler slant by which the gigantic rampart might be scaled.

Suddenly I heard a cry from Ducros, who was next me on the line of search, and at the same moment observed a flock of huge crows rising like a cloud, wheeling and angrily screaming over the spot from which Ducros had shouted. The others followed me towards him at a run, and soon the five of us were gathered in a small chamber of rock, open to the sky but walled around almost completely.

We had not long to look for what had been about in that grisly cache. There lay against one of the encircling rocks a hu-

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man skeleton—a very fresh one. Ducros was kneeling over it and examining it in thoughtful, deliberative fashion; he gave a low, satisfied grunt, passed his hand under the naked ribs and picked off the rock something that glittered as he held it up to the light. Nothing else appeared in evidence of how the dead man had come by his end; there could be no sign of a wound, for the very good reason that no flesh remained to show a wound; but that glittering object in Ducros' hand seemed conclusive. It was a leaden bullet that had spattered out against the rock, having evidently passed through the body first.

"So!" cried Ducros, looking over his shoulder, "I see what happen here, my friends. This *canaille* is native. I think he refuse to go farther with Monsieur Coningham—perhaps he is fearing those devil in river above. So then I think Monsieur Coningham shoot him, to make other native know he mean business, by dam! This bullet, I say he is rifle bullet. Estarkenden, do I not tell you Monsieur Coningham have rifle of that ship *Tonquinaise?*"

I stared at the horrible relic, feeling physically sick. I could not doubt that Ducros' theory was correct. The absence of any clothing but a blood-stained cloth about what had been the waist of the dead man—that proved him to have been a native. And from the raw look of the bones it seemed likely that this murdered litter-bearer had been alive when Starkenden first sighted the smoke of the fire.

Then, from somewhere quite near, a fresh cry arose. Gregory Hope had withdrawn silently while the rest of us were still conducting the post-mortem over that hideous raw skeleton.

Starkenden at once bounded off in the direction of the cry, and reached Hope first. By the time I arrived the pair of them were kneeling beside a low black hole in the cliff face. This place, like the one we had just left, was so shut in behind great boulders that it was small wonder we had missed it before. The aperture measured about three feet square, and though now worn into a sort of half-oval it had clearly been rectangular at the first. Without any question of doubt that hole betrayed the hand of man.

Starkenden dived into it, and emerged a few moments later throwing away a burnt match-end and staring up at the enormous cliff.

"There is a stair," he muttered excitedly. "But it is a good deal broken up—it will not be easy to mount."

Gregory Hope entered next. His reappearance was more sudden than stately; we heard a prolonged rumble, a thud, and saw one of Gregory's feet dimly outlined in the mouth of the excavation.

"No," he said drily, as he reappeared blinking and coughing, "it isn't going to be easy. There's enough loose rock lying about to build another cliff. We shall have to strike matches all the way."

We examined our store, but found there was now hardly half a box between all of us. We had squandered most of our matches in consulting Starkenden's compass on that disastrous night march across the rocks. And it seemed that if indeed this stairway led to the top of the cliff, it must be of great length.

"A torch!" cried Starkenden at last. "That is the only thing. What are we to make it with?"

This was something of an enigma, for there appeared to be not a leaf or stick of vegetation in all the region round. We had long ago realised that for that fire of theirs, Coningham's bearers must have carried wood up from the jungle; if they had actually ascended this stairway; no doubt a brand from the same fire had served them for a light.

Ducros stroked his beard meditatively for a moment or two, then propounded a solution, and I remember thinking at the time that Ducros' idea would not have occurred to many men. It positively made my blood run cold to watch this saturnine giant tackling the problem as if it had been a common every-day hitch in a household ménage.

He first led us back to where the skeleton of the dead native lay.

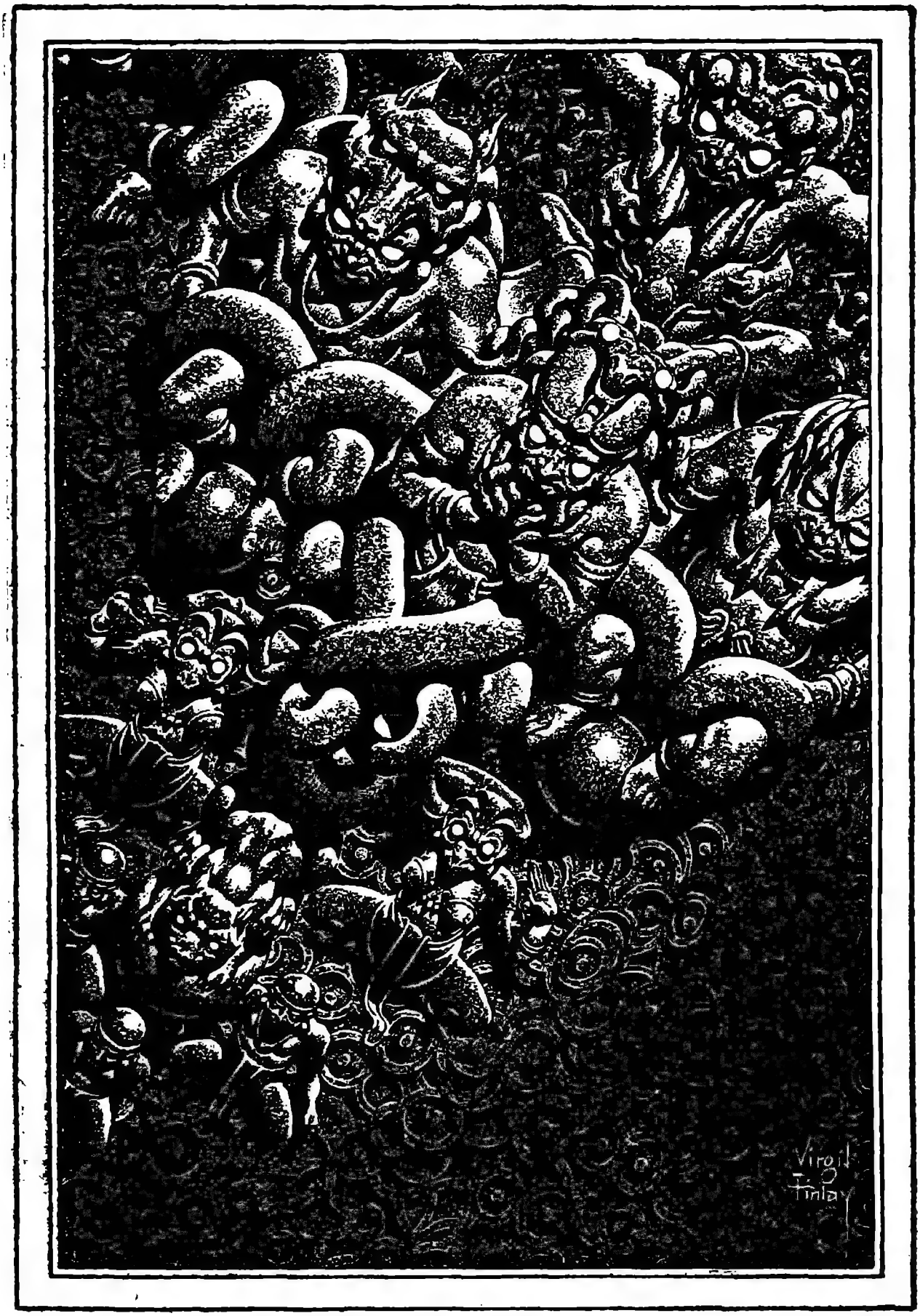
"So!" he chuckled grimly. "I think this fellow not require his head in future!"

With that he knelt down, wrenched the skull from the spine, and handed it to Simbok. "You take this to lake, Simbok, and you wash clean and shake him dry," he said. "Do not you lose him in water, or I pull your head off you to make up for him, by dam!"

Simbok took the skull, handling it every bit as unconcernedly as Ducros had done, and made away toward the lakeside.

"Crayton," said Ducros next, "you will take those rifles and open little door in butt of each one. There you find bottle of oil. You please collect."

I did as I was bid, at the same time exchanging a quick glance with Gregory Hope. My friend's supposition as to the previous career of Ducros had manifestly



The rock wall was decorated over every square foot of its surface with sculptures.

been founded on fact; nobody but a man who had seen military service, I think, would have known exactly where to lay hands upon the oil-bottle belonging to a service rifle.

Luckily, these arms which Starkenden had obtained at Haiphong were fresh from store, and the oil-bottles all full. While I was getting them together Ducros took the dead native's loin-cloth, tore several thin strips from it and very carefully plaited these into one piece about as thick as a man's little finger. By the time he had finished, Simbok was back with the cleansed and dried skull. Ducros emptied the oil-bottles into it one after another, let down the plaited cloth through one of the sockets of the eyes, and after allowing the oil time to soak up through, stuck a match and lit the improvised wick.

"Here is your torch, Estarkenden," he said, again chuckling grimly. "He is not style of Paris, but I think he burn to top of these stair if you carry him always upside up."

Ducros methodically returned the oil-bottles to the butts of the rifles, satisfied himself the weapons were all loaded, and gave one to each of us and the remaining three to Simbok. We then started the ascent, Starkenden leading with Ducros' makeshift lamp.

THERE were many strange and startling experiences that befell us afterwards—in fact, I came to realise later on that at this point we had been merely on the threshold of our adventure; but no single experience stands out more clearly in my recollection than that climb up into the forbidden land.

We had assumed from the existence of stairs, of course, that the passage led somewhere up to the crest of that gigantic cliff, though exactly where it would land us we had but the vaguest conception. And as we ascended, our ideas on the point grew vaguer and vaguer. The stairway was a good deal wider than the entrance to it, but as Starkenden's body obscured the feeble light he carried, we others behind him were in pitch darkness most of the while. That fact considerably enhanced our bewilderment, as did the great length of the passage. We groped our way on and up, on and up, and long before the end came I was beginning to think there must be a veritable mountain behind the cliff and that we were scaling it on the inside.

One thing was increasingly borne in upon us as we advanced; we had done wisely to bring a light. Without it we should have fared worse than we did, perhaps come to grief altogether, for there was much loose rock lying on the deep, broad steps, and more than once an ugly snag crashed down out of the roof at a mere touch. Starkenden halted to give us warning when he reached a dangerous neighborhood, however, and for the most part we were able to avoid treading on loose stuff underfoot or bringing an avalanche on to our heads. How the passage had become thus obstructed I was unable to conjecture then, though I have since come to the conclusion that at some time in the past that region must have been visited by violent earth-tremors—which were perhaps responsible also for detaching those huge boulders of rock from the cliff face.

At last a cry from Starkenden announced we were near the end of the ascent.

"There is daylight ahead," he called over his shoulder. "I will pass back the lamp. Whoever is lowest on the stairs must carry it if we have to retreat. I will look out to see if all is clear."

A moment later he had given us the word to come on up. We filed out into the light of day, and stood rubbing our eyes and blinking upon what must surely be one of the strangest localities in this world.

We had emerged on to a ledge not more than a yard wide, evidently hewn out by human agency as the stairway had been. This ledge was overhung by an enormous eave of white rock which completely shut out the view above, yet we had means of judging what was there, nevertheless. We now stood about thirty feet above the level of the stream.

On the opposite side, some fifty yards away, rose a gigantic cliff, and this appeared to be the counterpart of the one in which the ledge had been cut. On our left hand was that V-shaped cleft providing an outfall for the water of the mysterious river; there the two cliffs drew in together, so that the gap, even at its top, was barely half as wide as the watercourse at the point where we stood.

The water of the river was collected into a pool immediately above the outlet, and for fully a hundred yards it filled the entire gully; but a little farther on, that is to say, on our right hand as we emerged from the cliff stairway, there was a broad belt of sand on either side of the stream, which of itself appeared to be of no great

volume. The ledge sloped gradually and evenly down to this sand belt, meeting it at a point well beyond the accumulated water; and I began to see now why the stairway had been cut and why it had been brought to a level so high above the bed of the stream; it must afford a way to the gully for considerably longer periods of the year than that gap in the cliff.

So high were the walls of this gigantic cleft between the mountains that even now, at an hour of broad daylight elsewhere, it was plunged in a sort of ghastly unreal twilight. We stared and stared about us, spellbound, then peered up into the great cañon, but we could not see far; the cañon twisted, the narrow riband of water in its centre wound around a bend of the cliffs and was lost to view. And nowhere was any sign of a living thing but those huge carrion crows that flapped out over the dizzy cliff-top and squawked with a note that was eerie and devilish.

Starkenden blew out the lamp, laid it carefully just inside the mouth of the stair, and led the way down that long slanting ledge. When we reached the bottom of it, two or three very eloquent facts presented themselves to our attention. I had found it difficult to believe that a party containing a woman had actually climbed that perilous rock stairway; yet here, sure enough, were confused footprints which reached away along the sand-belt, with the stream on one hand and sheer, insurmountable cliff on the other.

"Come," said Starkenden, taking a grip of his rifle. "The end is in sight. Let us hasten on!"

ONE great danger threatened us now—scarcity of food. The dried meat we had brought up from the jungle could last only for another day or two at the outside, nor was there much hope of getting fresh supplies in the uncanny region to which we had penetrated. That great gully seemed every whit as bare of vegetation as the rock country outside, and we knew well enough that where there is no vegetation there is likely to be no life; yet even so, we gathered a hint that these conditions did not prevail indefinitely. Several times during the day, as we trudged along the bank of the stream, we came upon fragments of dried, bleached driftwood—twigs and the small boughs of trees—that must undoubtedly have been washed down from some more fertile region to the north. It was therefore vitally necessary to press on out of the surrounding desert as soon as might be; and press on we did, keeping an eager lookout ahead, but seeing still no live thing but the repulsive, circling crows—whose motive in following us was grimly obvious—and no other movement at all but the sluggish flow of the stream.

Soon now the sun had risen vertically over our heads, throwing the cañon into a glare as ghastly and unreal as the gloom before, and filling it with fierce heat; and I recollect how it seemed to my fevered senses that the water of the stream crept down over those roasted sands with a subtle, menacing hiss. During this period of the day, also, we were tormented to exasperation by minute flies that rose in invisible swarms and bit us voraciously—as our puffed, smarting faces soon bore witness.

The tracks of the fugitives were never clear in that fine dry sand; from time to time, indeed, we could not have said with assurance that any travellers had recently passed that way before us—save for the fact that there was no other way they could have taken. Mile after mile the cliff walls rose sheer, with never a break or crevice. Small wonder, it seemed to me, this strange cleavage between the mountains had remained unknown to the world at large. As Starkenden pointed out, the gap at the bottom end of it must have been but very rarely passable.

As for the secret stairway, we ourselves had only discovered that because we were looking for some such passage through or over the cliff. What chance of finding it would a casual explorer have had? And even granted an accidental discovery, he would have been likelier to starve in the gully than get back with its secret to the outer world.

At last, towards sundown, being at the end of our strength we called a halt. As I have already mentioned it was only for an hour or two on either side of noon that this deep ravine received a full measure of daylight. Now, with the sun drawn away westward and shut off by the great rock wall, everything was plunged again into its normal forbidding gloom. Simbok had gathered an armful of the bleached driftwood as we came along and, having assured ourselves there were no enemies at least within eyeshot, we made a fire preparatory to camping for the night.

Ducros laid out our small unappetising stock of dried meat and frowned heavily upon it. "It is poor food for long march-

ing, my friends," he grunted. "I think to try for some better. Simbok, you carry piece of bamboo, *hein?*"

The native dived a hand into the recesses of his clothing and produced several small slivers of the plant that serves more uses than any other on this earth. Ducros took one piece, split off a spike, deftly sharpened it at each end, tied a length of string to the middle, looped the string round a rough float of twig, and baited the bamboo with a shred of the dried meat.

"This also jungle style, Crayton," he remarked to me. "I think you learn many trick this journey, by dam! Now I try for casting bread upon waters."

He withdrew to the edge of the stream, followed by Simbok. Starkenden continued to divide up the dried meat, but before he had finished Simbok was back—with a small fish something like a plaice in shape and weighing, I should judge, about half a pound. He gutted the creature with one slash of his knife and toasted it on a twig over the fire, whereupon there arose a savour that I for one found absolutely irresistible.

Simbok held out the cooked fish to Starkenden. "M'sieur him glad you eatum," he said. "*Fort bon*, him tink."

Starkenden tasted the fish and pronounced it excellent. Simbok then returned to the water's edge, but he did not remain there long; he was back almost at once with three new captures and a demand for more bait. Gregory Hope and I were soon devouring a savoury morsel apiece and sharing Starkenden's opinion of it; not since we left Berrow's resthouse in the jungle had we eaten anything half as good, and before that, not once from the day we cast civilisation behind us at Haiphong. But Ducros' resourcefulnesss in exploiting that most unpromising stream had a much more dramatic upshot than merely furnishing us food.

Suddenly, we all heard him utter a loud cry. In another moment Ducros was running up the shelving sand bank a good deal faster than it was his habit to move, and looking strangely different from the Ducros we had seen up to that time. Hitherto he had accepted the thrills and perils and hardships of the expedition one after another as they came, without any noticeable quickening of the pulse. Now Ducros was undisguisedly excited. He held out one of his huge hands, dripping wet, to our leader.

"Estarkenden," he said hoarsely, "I beg you tell me what is that!"

Starkenden took the object from Ducros' palm and stared at it. For several moments he squatted on the sand stock still, silent, like a man enchanted. Then the spell broke.

"You found this in the water?" he boomed, springing to his feet in one bound.

"As I sit fishing," returned Ducros, "something is there half bury in sand. But he twinkle, and I see him, by dam! It is that stone. What do you say, my friend?"

We had gathered round Starkenden, who continued to stare in a sort of unholy ecstasy. There was no need to ask what the stone was. Any known gem in the rough state might have given us to doubt, but this thing, even with Starkenden's hand already half closed over it, glinted and burned like the amazing eyestone he had shown us in the cabin on the *Queen of Araby*.

WITHOUT another word Starkenden rushed helterskelter down to the water's edge. We followed him, likewise in silence, and stood there lined up, staring stupidly into the stream. Then we knelt one and all with the precision of a string of marionettes, and ran our hands through the water and the sand as if we expected to find the river full of eyestones. But no other eyestone came to light.

"There must be more," muttered Starkenden. "Plenty more. Eyestones in handfuls, in heaps. Wealth untold—"

His words had risen in fierce crescendo and ended almost in a screech; he trembled from head to foot, he clutched the eyestone to his breast, then tore open his clothing and thrust the gem into a pocket of his belt. Ducros followed it greedily with his eyes, like a dog that has had a bone snatched away from him by another dog; for one moment I thought he was going to grab it back. He checked himself, however, swung around, and stared first into the fast-darkening water, then long and intently up the fast-darkening ravine.

"There is no more gem here, Estarkenden," he said at last, in a voice curiously unlike his own. "Some place up stream, my friend. And that Coningham get there first, by dam! That is not good for us!"

Starkenden straightened himself up with a jolt. "That *must* not be!" he hissed. "*We* must lay hands on those gems. They are worth a king's ransom. Four figures would not cover the value of this one alone when it is cut. We must have them—all! And—and there is my daughter's safety to consider."

I glanced from one to another of that small group, and never shall I forget the picture they presented. Starkenden was manifestly fast in the grip of an overpowering avarice, Ducros seemed hardly less so; and there was a strange subdued gleam in Simbok's sullen countenance which I could only ascribe to the very same emotion.

But let not me, of all persons, cast any reproach upon them. I too had seen more in Starkenden's hand than that one glittering pebble; I had seen my own lost fortune restored and multiplied tenfold, wealth and power hitherto undreamed, and in the contemplation I had forgotten manhood and chivalry and every other decent impulse as completely as they. And not until I heard Starkenden's words, "There is my daughter's safety to consider—" coming as they did like a mere afterthought—was I called to myself.

Of us all, I think, one man alone had stood the strain. That was Gregory Hope. I saw him looking at Starkenden, who appeared to be quite unconscious of it, however, with an expression of very candid loathing and contempt.

"Come," said Starkenden at last, in a leveller tone. "This has modified our plans. We do not know what lies at the other end of the river—Coningham may find gems and escape that way with them. We must push on again."

It was an eerie experience from the beginning, that night march, and it grew eerier as time went on. If the ravine was sombre and forbidding by day, its darkness now was a thing that well nigh paralyzed the senses. As on the two previous nights there was no moon, and the feeble light of the stars overhead seemed hardly able to penetrate down into that immense bulk of darkness; the sand underfoot looked pitch black as the great towering walls, and but for the water of the stream, which lay on our left hand in a riband of the profoundest blue—a bare shade distinguishable from the rest—we should have seen nothing in that cañon at all. For the most part we kept close to the water's edge; it was safer than groping along the cliff face, and a good deal faster.

Aching and spent we stumbled on, like lost spirits driven into some gloomy hell of an oriental poet's imagining, and we must have advanced many miles before the final phase. That came in a way that sets me shuddering to this day when I think of it. Not that I have ever been able to get clear in my mind what actually happened. The account which follows is one I have put together from what I vaguely remember of the horrors of those few ghastly minutes, supplemented and corrected where possible by impressions that came to me later, when I had leisure—only too much of it—to think the affair out and compare notes with others of our ill-fated party. Never, as will hereafter appear, did I see the spot where our march came to an end.

Suddenly, without a breath of warning, I was conscious of danger very close to us. I could see nothing, and at first I could hear and feel nothing, yet I knew we were not alone in the ravine. Then I became aware of a curious surging round my knees—no higher; I felt swift light brushings, and heard the sand dashed up in spurts, and I remember that at the moment there flashed through my brain certain native stories of ghost-wolves which Ducros had told us on the way up country. I leapt back, bringing my rifle to my shoulder and peered into the blackness. I did not cry out, or hear any of my companions cry out; I fancy the stunning suddenness of the affair must have robbed us all of utterance. I pulled frantically at the trigger of my rifle, and at that instant the sense of nightmare was tenfold intensified for me. *The trigger of my rifle would not pull.*

Then the things were upon us—whatever they were. And those things were not ghost-wolves, or anything else ghostly. They were solid, heavy, inconceivably strong. Several of them leapt to the level of my shoulder, clutching and bearing me down; I felt hairy hands or claws at my throat, and the reek of hot, animal breath in my nostrils. I made an attempt to club the rifle, but it was immediately jerked out of my hands with terrific force; something was thrown over my head, I was dragged to earth, my hands and feet held in a grip of steel. Fortunately, I had presence of mind enough to give up struggling now. That thing which had been thrown over my head was a bag, for I felt it tied round my throat, tight and suffocating; and I realised I should suffocate all the quicker if I wasted breath wrestling with the inevitable.

I was rolled over and bound hand and foot, then lifted from the sand and carried off. And I am certain my captors very quickly left the soft sand. The change was sharply noticeable; there came jolts as they stepped, I knew I was being borne over some hard surface, and a sloping sur-

face at that; for some distance my head was at a considerably higher level than my heels, which would scarcely have been the case with a body carried along flat ground. My captors turned at right angles, as it seemed; then there came to me a most curiously ill-defined impression that I was being carried into a tunnel.

As everybody knows, a person often becomes subtly conscious when passing under cover, even if the eyes are blindfolded and the light of day completely shut out; among blind folk, indeed, I believe the sensation is sometimes so strong as to be dependable. I may have actually felt that sensation now, or imagined it on the strength of the rock-hewn stairs through which we had entered this ravine at its southern end. At all events, I certainly thought I was being carried into a tunnel or cave, and before very long I had reason to know that belief was correct.

ALL this time, it should be borne in mind, I was gathering impressions by the sense of touch alone. The bag that had been thrown over my head prevented me from hearing anything but the most confused and unintelligible sounds, or seeing anything at all. One fact, nevertheless, stands out clear from all the jumble of confusion and horror. Not only had I failed to get off one shot with my rifle, no man among us succeeded. A rifle shot in that enclosed cañon would have roared and reverberated like a big gun, and in spite of the encumbrance over my ears I should unquestionably have heard it. Our failure to make use of the rifles is a matter that became somewhat clearer to me later on.

I judge that the spot where we were seized could not have been more than ten yards from the place where that shelving hard surface began; then came the right-angled turn, next the curious impression I had of being taken under cover. There were several more turns now, though I would hesitate to say whether they were made to the right or to the left, for by this time I was not only losing my sense of direction but had well nigh lost my senses altogether.

At last I was thrown down on to something hard and left lying where I fell. Very faintly and confusedly there came to my ears a sound which I can only liken to a heavy truckload of luggage being rolled across the platform of a railway station. This sound ended in a dull crash; then, virtually, silence.

For a few moments I remained quite still, striving to take a grip of my scattered senses. The immediate danger was of suffocation from the bag over my head: therefore I set myself first to get rid of that. It was no easy matter. My hands were tied behind me, not only to one another but also to my trussed feet, and the posture alone become an agony before long, apart from the torture of thongs that seemed to bite into my very bones. I realised at once that my one hope lay in a set of strong, sharp teeth. Slowly, laboriously, with the dogged brute cunning of a human being reduced to the last extremity, I began gnawing at that bag over my head.

It must have been many minutes before I succeeded in working any of the material between my teeth at all, but when once I had got a purchase I did not let go again. I continued grinding with closed jaws like a bull-dog, and at length made an impression. Strand by strand the tough cloth gave, until there remained in my mouth what must have been a piece the shape of a thin spear-point. I blew it out and took a deep breath. The relief was unspeakable. I then angled for a fresh grip, bit more and more away, and at last felt my lips uncovered.

The air was not fresh; nor was it altogether foul, though there pervaded the place a faint animal reek utterly unlike any other smell I had ever encountered. Experienced travellers hold that there is a distinctive smell to every native race on the globe; apparently this odour was the characteristic smell of the creatures that had seized us. It constitutes, I may observe, one of many recollections of this adventure which keep me waking at nights when I think of them now.

I lay in the only position possible to a man bound as I was—that is to say, on my side—and endeavored to look down towards the hole I had bitten in the head-bag. I could not cast my eyes directly upon it, of course, but the attempt at least convinced me I was in total darkness. I noticed, also, that the hole in the bag had improved my hearing greatly; I could now catch confused sounds not very far away.

My next task was to free my hands and feet. This took me longer than biting the hole in the bag, yet it proved not insurmountable. Though the thongs were tight the knotting of them, as it appeared, had been hastily and carelessly done—no doubt from consideration of the fact that I was deposited in a perfectly safe place. Before an hour was past, or what I judged to be

an hour, I had wriggled first one wrist and then the other free, and set about disencumbering my head. The bag had been secured at the back of my neck with rough thongs. These and the thongs binding my feet I got rid of, then lay on my back at full length to rest. It was long yet before I could muster the strength and determination to examine my prison.

A single circuit on my hands and knees was enough to tell me I was completely immured in walls of solid rock. At only one point was there any semblance of a break. There I discovered a deep recess about five feet square, blocked from outside by a surface of stone that felt no different from the rest of the walls except that all round it was a very narrow crack. This, apparently, was the door through which I had been carried.

I pushed against it, first gently, then harder, then with all my force; the stone gave perhaps an eighth of an inch, but came to rest against something solid and quite immovable. There occurred to my recollection the strange growling noise I had heard after being brought in. If that were the door rolling into position, most probably it rolled endways. I pushed upon it now to the right, now to the left, but not a fraction of an inch would the stone move in either direction.

I felt the surface of that stone carefully over, from the base upwards. Not until my hands were approaching the upper edge did I discover any break at all; about six inches from the top, however, there was a small hole, smooth-rimmed and perfectly circular in shape, and deeper than any of my fingers could reach. As I knelt there, this hole was above the level of my eyes, and looked like a faintly luminous spot; concluding, therefore, that it ran clean through the rock door to some lighted chamber outside, I rose from my knees to examine it more closely. An instant later I had received one of the ghastliest shocks of my life. Directly opposite, though at what distance I could not tell, appeared *a human eye, huge, red, fiery, staring straight into mine.*

I started back with a gasp of downright horror. It was some moments before I could bring myself to take another look through that hole, but at last the frightful fascination of it drew me forward; I looked again, and remained looking. The eye was still there. It did not move or blink or give any sign of life. Then in a flash the meaning of it came to my bewildered brain. I remembered the amazing cut gem which Starkenden had shown us in the cabin of the *Queen of Araby*, and the rough one discovered by Ducros in the bed of the river.

That great red eye outside my prison was not alive. It was an eyestone set in the wall of these caves, and so set, apparently, that it might for ever glare upon the occupant of this cell. We had long ago learned that the gem called eyestone emitted a light of its own. I now inferred that in the chamber outside my prison there was some red-tinged light or other, and that this, falling upon the already luminous stone, gave it the appearance of a great, flaming, blood-gorged eye.

BUT what followed was ghastlier yet. Suddenly something came between the eyestone and my spy-hole. It seemed also to obscure the luminous spot altogether, and I was staring at it for several moments before I realised what it was. It was the curve of a powerful shoulder, thickly matted with coarse hair like the hair of an ape.

The sickening horror of it set my midriff heaving, but curiosity and a sort of grisly fascination held me more strongly than horror repelled. Otherwise I might have drawn back from that aperture in the cavern door and escaped the sight that next appeared opposite. I saw the loathsome hairy surface move, sideways and downward. The lineaments of a half-animal face passed the hole. Finally there came to rest in a line with it another eye—a live one, though I cannot call it human.

It was the eye of a beast, full of cruelty and cunning and ferocious hate. In the darkness where I crouched on half-bended knees I could scarcely have been seen by that eye, yet from its sudden expression of gloating anticipation it seemed to know I was there at the spy-hole. As I have said, that eye was not human; nor was it altogether the eye of a brute, but of something shrewder, more vindictive, more dangerous than any brute. What I had seen was clearly one of the creatures that had captured us—an indweller of the caves.

I sank back to the rock floor, shivering from head to foot with sheer, mad fright. I was hard put to it not to scream aloud. Many times during the past few minutes had I been tempted to cry out to my companions in hope of learning where they were, but that awful eye at the vent-hole convinced me of the unwisdom of uttering a sound. To do so would be merely to an-

nounce that I had at least thrown off the head-bag, and would very possibly result in my being visited from without and bound afresh.

At last, however, as I sat straining my ears, I heard a curious and persistent noise for which I was some time at a loss to account. It then occurred to me that this might be a water-drip. These caves, I reflected, no doubt occurred in a limestone formation similar to that of the cliffs we had seen by daylight farther south, and limestone caves, to the best of my knowledge, are commonly subject to drips. And yet, though I felt methodically all over the floor of my cell, I could detect no trace of moisture. Moreover, if it was a drip outside, the sound would hardly have reached me at all.

That noise continued to baffle me for several minutes. What finally set me on the right track was the fact that it did not come regularly, but in intermittent beats; not only that, the same succession of beats seemed to be repeating itself over and over again. Then, with an indescribable thrill of renewed hope, I grasped exactly what was taking place. Someone was tapping on the wall of the caves near by, tapping out a message in the Morse code, and pausing between times as if to wait for an answer. From my own service during the Great War of Europe I remembered something of the code, and by the time that message had repeated itself twice or thrice more I had managed to spell out its meaning:

"Hope here. Where are you, Crayton?"

I searched my pockets for something hard, found a briar-root pipe, and with it tapped a reply on the wall of my cell that seemed nearest to the other sound. I record here, of course, the bare conversation that passed, though in actual fact there were many halts and repetitions owing to my inexpert use of the code.

"Crayton here. Shut in a cell. I cannot be far from you. Are you bound?"

"Was but got loose. Did you see what happened?"

"No. Bag thrown over my head. Are you alone?"

"Yes. Do you know where others are?"

At this point, while I was still thinking out the longs and shorts for my response, I became aware of a knocking from another direction, and checked my message to listen. The new tapping came with more readiness than mine, though not so fluently as the taps I had first caught.

"Starkenden here. Have heard all. Going by sound cells are in a line Crayton in centre."

Hardly was this message finished when a tapping broke out in a fresh quarter. So far as I could judge, it arose from somewhere opposite the stone door of my prison. I eagerly spelt out the words, and as I did so, there rushed through my veins a tingle of livelier and profounder horror than any that had gone before. The message ran:

"You are the greatest fools in the whole of Asia."

CHAPTER VI

WE FIND THE BROTHER OF STARKENDEN

THERE followed a long, tense silence. Hope and Starkenden had manifestly heard that last message, grasped its horrible implications, and realised as clearly as I that it was no longer safe for us to tap Morse signals on the walls of our cells. There were other ears listening. The last communication had come from an eavesdropper, an enemy—a European enemy; and that enemy could be only one man.

We knew Coningham was somewhere ahead of us in the cañon. From our leader's account of him we knew he had nursed through sixteen years his hatred of Abel Starkenden. From his dealings with Starkenden's daughter and the ill-fated *Tonquinaise* and that recalcitrant native at the foot of the cliff, we knew him also to be a monster of cunning and cruelty. What were his exact relations with our captors I could but vaguely surmise, though I vividly remembered Starkenden's statement that it was Coningham who had instigated savages to attack him and his brother on their original expedition.

Now it seemed plain enough that Coningham had enlisted against us these loathsome savages of the caves—it might be the same tribe. We had pursued Coningham over thousands of miles of land and sea; now the tables were turned, the hunters hunted, ambushed, and caught.

I leaned back against the wall of the cell and sank into a stupor. That one small hole in the door was the only ventilation to this ghastly den, and the atmosphere was already beginning to be oppressively foul—yet it was not bad air alone that stupefied me. I became prey to an overwhelming, black despair.

So lost was I to what was happening around me that I did not realize somebody

had approached the door of the cell. Somebody or something must have come near, nonetheless; the door rolled a few inches ajar, an oblong of the queer reddish light appeared between it and the wall; I had a fleeting glimpse of horrible hairy hands pushing something through the aperture, then the door was rolled into position again with a crash.

I crawled up and felt over the dark floor of the cell. There was a rude platter, apparently of stone, bearing dried meat which I afterwards tasted and pronounced to be goat's flesh, and a small jar of water. I was not, then, to be let starve. And my captors must have seen or guessed that by this time I had cast off the head-bag and the thongs.

I sipped the water and began to eat, ravenously. As everybody knows there is no creator of hunger and thirst like violent emotions, and the emotions that had swept over me during the past few hours were more than violent. I seized the food and devoured it, and drank the water to the last drain. The goat's flesh tasted to me like choice venison, the water like vintage wines.

I must have fallen asleep after the meal, for when I awoke my surroundings had undergone a marked change. The cell was now full of that curious red-tinged light I had seen in the rock-chamber without. Also, to my inexpressible joy, I was no longer alone: Gregory Hope squatted beside me on the stone floor, peering anxiously into my face. There were iron shackles on my wrists and ankles, each pair joined by three rude links of the same metal. Gregory was similarly fettered, and the way we shook hands in silence would have seemed a comic double-fisted gesture, I think, to men in less desperate straits.

Speak softly," he whispered at last. "How do you feel?"

"My worst yet," I replied, licking my dry lips. "I've been asleep, and the inside of my mouth is like sawdust."

"Have you eaten?"

"Some meat and water were pushed through the door."

Gregory nodded. "Same here," he said. "And those vlands were doctored—presumably so that we could be brought along from our temporary quarters without fuss."

"You mean this is not the place where you were put at first?"

"I don't think it is, though I can't be certain. I went off pretty well at once after eating, and woke to find myself here, wearing bangles like yours. But I imagine the regular tenant of this simple apartment is the fellow behind you."

I swung around, and saw to my astonishment that there was a stranger in the cell, an aged man half lying, half sitting against the back wall. He was terribly emaciated, wrapped in filthy rags, and his long dirty-white hair and beard straggled over his shrunken chest and shoulders and on to the stone floor beside him. The man simpered at me with an imbecile grin, and wagged his head to and fro in a lifeless manner that was horrible to behold. But most horrible of all was the fact that he was, or at least had been, a European.

"My God!" I gasped. "Who is it? Can this be Felix Starkenden?"

"There you have me guessing, *amigo*. I've tried him in several languages, and I've tried him with the names Felix and Starkenden, but neither seems to bring the least sense into his face. His age is rather against the idea, but that may prove nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"If this fellow is Starkenden's brother," returned Gregory, grimly, "he's put in sixteen years in these caves. That would age a man rather more than sixteen years outside, I should say. It isn't even considered necessary to chain him up now."

I looked at the pitiable object again, and saw that his hands and feet were indeed free—though the privilege could have been of little use to him. Whether Felix Starkenden or not, he afforded us confirmation of the stories we had heard that these savages of the river had been known to hold white men captive. And it seemed likely that this particular white man must have fallen into their clutches a good many years ago. He was now drivelling mad.

Gregory Hope spoke to me again in a low whisper, "You got the last message in Morse?" he asked. "After Starkenden's?"

"From Coningham, I took it to be. He must have heard everything."

"We're in thicker mud than that," replied Gregory, shaking his head. "Just get up and have a good look at the lamp."

WONDERING what on earth he could mean by this, I struggled to my feet and looked. Our cell, as I have mentioned, was full of curious red light, and this light came from a lamp that rested in a niche in the rock wall. I examined the lamp closely. It was of the rudest make,

furnished with a stone handle and luted all over with clay which somewhat obscured the design; yet there could be no doubt as to what formed the basis of the implement. That lamp had been fashioned out of a human skull.

I stared down at Gregory in dumb horror, as I began to catch his drift.

"If Ducros wasn't aware of the illumination employed in these caves," he said, "it was an odd coincidence he should hit on that very ingenious way of lighting us up the stairs, wasn't it?"

"You think Ducros was behind this attack?"

"Perhaps you didn't get that Morse message as clearly as I did, *amigo.* How did you read it?"

"*'You are the greatest fools in the whole of Asia,'*" I quoted from memory.

"Not quite the same," replied Gregory. "As I read it, that message went this way: *'You are greatest fools in whole of Asia.'* The sender wasn't pressed for time, either. He chopped out those definite articles because it was his usual style. There spoke the ungrammatical foreigner."

No word passed between us for some considerable time after this. For my part I was thinking hard—or as hard as a man may whose head is spinning under a vast inrush of unexpected enlightenment. And the more I pondered, the more amazing did it seem to me that we three had not suspected the truth before.

In the first place, was it not strange that Coningham should appear in Yokohama at the time he did, after remaining hidden for sixteen years? Ducros' letter to Starkenden could have arrived hardly a month before, yet Starkenden had overlooked the obvious connection between those two events. He had apparently conceived too blind a trust in Ducros ever to guess the latter was playing him false, and Gregory Hope and I had been betrayed by Starkenden into the same colossal blunder.

Yet with ordinary shrewdness we might have jumped to the truth for ourselves, on a dozen occasions. Incident after incident of the expedition now came back to my mind's eye in a vastly altered light. Ducros' pressing anxiety to avoid a collision with the *Tonquinaise* pirates near Nam Hoa, his anger with Simbok when he learned that the latter had led us near enough to overhear their talk, his very close and thoughtful study of a glinting object beside our first camp fire in the jungle, his subsequent "discovery" of a rough eyestone in the stream—at just such a time and just such a place; Ducros' constantly accurate suggestion of the likeliest route for the fugitives to have taken, the disastrous way we went astray across the rock country—for the first time in the whole march; finally, the fact that not one of us had managed to get off a shot from the rifles, and that it was *Ducros* who had set those rifles in order, after contriving his makeshift lamp. Altogether, there seemed nothing but suspicion against this French outlaw from the very beginning to the end.

I looked up at Gregory Hope, and saw his face contorted into a rueful grin. "Whoever sent that last message was right about us, amigo," he said. "I think I can see it all now. Can you?"

"Most of it. But how Coningham and Ducros come to be leagued with these filthy savages I don't see yet. Or why Coningham brought Starkenden's daughter here."

"I don't get that myself. But it couldn't be what we supposed at first—to force her to show him the way. He must have known already. The only guess I can propound is this: Coningham found the river, maybe by accident, and fell in with the savages, whom he had met before on that first expedition. He parleyed with them. He wanted eyestones. They wanted prisoners, and offered the one in exchange for the other. Coningham then struck down country, avoiding the French coast for obvious reasons, and went far enough south to run up against Ducros. D'you remember that yarn of Berrows' about a 'white devil' being seen in the jungle by Ducros' villagers? He thought it was himself, but I begin to doubt that. It may have been Coningham. From Ducros, Coningham learned that Starkenden was again in the East.

"Coningham seems to hate Starkenden pretty poisonously, and knew he could be lured up this river when few other men in the world would take on the proposition. To make surer of attracting Starkenden, Coningham abducts his daughter, thus increasing the prisoners by one and scoring over Starkenden still more. Though how he got her away from Yokohama beats me utterly. Perhaps we shall never know that. But—hullo!"

He turned his head sharply. The old man at the back of the cell was making curious mumbling noises with his lips, as if trying to speak. After a while his lips opened, and the words came, but not words

in any language either of us knew. This seemed strange to me at the time, for I should have said the prisoner had once been our own fellow countryman.

Gregory Hope crawled over to him, laid a gentle hand on his arm, and looked him steadily in the eyes. "Tell us in English," he said.

The withered eyes of the old man filled with tears; he collapsed straightway into the imbecility he had shown at the first, and though Gregory tried him again and again, not two coherent syllables could we coax out of him.

Then, when we had actually given up the attempt and turned away to resume our own talk, something came in a different tone. We did not approach him again, but watched the old man furtively and listened with strained ears. His lips shaped and unshaped themselves; he was fighting, as we could see, for a grip upon his pitiably errant mind. Finally there was an utterance which I thought I could recognise as English, though the harsh, guttural accent that overlaid the words rendered them barely distinguishable.

That accent of itself told us something, however; it was markedly suggestive of the sounds the old man first made, and I could only conclude he had been speaking to us in the language of these caves. Evidently this broken wreck of humanity had not had occasion to use his own language for a great while.

"Undying one?" I whispered to Gregory. "What can it mean?"

AFTER another long pause the old man repeated the words, and several times again.

"Patience, *amigo,*" muttered Gregory. "The thread is very slender." Then, turning to our fellow prisoner, he said very slowly and distinctly, "Nobody will hurt you while we are here. Tell us who the undying one is. Where is he?"

The old man feebly waved his shrunken arm towards the back wall of the cell. "Undying—one," he said, the words forced out with an agony of effort. "He—does—not—die. I shall—die—soon."

And at this very instant the old man sank into a corner and was overtaken with the sudden sleep of second childhood.

"So much for the present," said Gregory, having vainly striven to rouse him. "We must begin again when he wakes. There is an individual in residence, then, known as the Undying One. That cannot be Coningham, I think, nor any of the hairy brutes outside these cells. Apparently we have still to make the acquaintance of the Undying One."

We were not to do that yet, however, or to gain any other enlightenment. Whether because of the numbing bad air or from a recurrent influence of the drug, we must have ourselves fallen asleep about this time; and when I awakened I saw at once that there was a further addition to our company. Sprawling just inside the door of the cell lay Starkenden, insensible, and shackled in the same fashion as we.

I woke Gregory, and we knelt beside Starkenden and felt him all over for injuries. He appeared to be unhurt, though it was some while before we could get him back to his senses. We learned from him afterwards that he too had lost consciousness immediately after eating some food thrust into his cell.

Gregory Hope had placed himself designedly between Starkenden and the stranger. He shook our leader by the arm until his eyes opened and he stared up into our faces with a wild expression of horror. That at once left him, however, when he recognised us.

"Starkenden," said Gregory softly, "there is another prisoner here, and we should like your opinion as to who it is."

He continued to stare at us absently, then shook his great head like a dog, rubbed his eyes, and struggled into a sitting posture.

"That fellow in the corner," said Gregory, edging aside. "Do you recognise him?"

Starkenden was still curiously dazed. For a moment he seemed hardly to understand what had been said to him. Then he glanced around the cell, saw the old man, crawled towards him and stared long and fixedly.

"Who is it?" he demanded, turning to us.

"Then it isn't your brother!"

"My brother? I—I do not think it can be. If it is, he is terribly changed from when I last saw him. But does not the man himself know who he is?"

"I've tried to get it out of him, but I can't."

"Has he not spoken to you at all?"

"A few words only. We gathered from him there is a person here whom he calls the Undying One. What do you make of that?"

Starkenden puckered his brows; his chin came forward. By this time he had evidently taken in his surroundings to the

full, and I noticed a kindling of that strange smoulder in his eyes. "I can make nothing of it," he said grimly.

"What do you make of the cave-men?"

"They appear to me to be lower than any other savages on this earth, but—" his voice suddenly flew up into a howl of fury—"they are not so low as the two white men allied with them!"

"I wouldn't shout, anyway," suggested Gregory. "Somebody may be listening again. You got that last Morse message, I take it?"

Starkenden answered nothing, but as he sat there with his back planted against the rock wall, his eyes glaring straight across at the opposite one, we realised without any words that Starkenden was now as well aware of the true worth of Ducros' friendship as we were. On one point he was even able to supplement what we had already divined. After a long pause, during which his rage seemed to have robbed him of the power of utterance, Starkenden suddenly began fumbling with his clothes, took out that antique silver compass and pried open the cover.

"If I had had the common sagacity to examine this before," he said in a low, savage growl, "we should never have walked into this trap. Take it and see for yourselves."

Gregory got to his feet, holding the open compass up to the lamp, and together we scanned it closely. I could detect nothing amiss with the instrument at first. The next moment we were exchanging glances full of comprehension. A small fragment of steel, apparently the tip of a knife-blade, had been wedged inside that compass in such a way that it could not be seen until the cover was raised. Starkenden had now joined us; he snatched the compass from Gregory, his hands trembling with passion.

"See!" he muttered. "When the iron is removed—so—the needle resumes its correct pointing. That iron never got there by accident. You recollect what happened when we reached the *jak* tree, and I sighted the camp fire? Ducros insisted on going up to see for himself. He was a long while in that tree—and he had the compass with him. The scoundrel foresaw I should use it to reach that camp fire by a night march. Had we kept to our true course we might have done so, and saved my daughter from ever being brought into this hellish place.

"So Ducros contrived we should go astray in the dark. He also took care afterwards that we should not use the compass by daylight and discover it had been tampered with. That was the man I had trusted implicitly, and treated generously in the past. Well, you have seen something of his strength, but if ever I get my hands on his throat—"

Starkenden's voice had risen again to a downright howl. For his appearance, I had never seen such fury and such hate written on a man's countenance, and I believe that if Starkenden had been free at that moment, even the herculean Ducros would have needed to look to himself. I may remark that on one or two occasions since we met him—as on the night of our departure from Yokohama—Starkenden had seemed to me to be inexplicably nervous, even afraid, of something or other. That was when we were in the outer world, at liberty, without any immediate danger threatening. Here in these caves, a prisoner, with every prospect of coming soon to a horrible end, Starkenden betrayed no sign of nervousness or fear whatever. I couldn't help thinking at the time how strangely contradictory it was.

THERE was one other very curious feature about this last meeting in our cell—for as will be seen, we were never again imprisoned in the same den with Starkenden. I noticed that although Gregory Hope more than once endeavoured to draw him into some scheme or campaign by which we could make terms with Coningham, or perhaps win over Ducros, Starkenden would not even deign to discuss the subject. The mere mention of those men threw him straight into an inarticulate rage, and when he had sufficiently regained composure to speak, all he uttered was a vague generality or two to the effect that our only hope of safety lay in our own efforts, and that we must stick together and remember the ancient Brotherhood of which we were all three sworn members.

It seemed natural enough for Starkenden to think of such a matter in our present case, but that he should hark back to it rather than enter into some more practical plan of escape, struck me as queer; and I saw from the way Gregory looked at him that he was as surprised and irritated as I was. And then, before we had any scheme formulated at all, we were interrupted.

We could hear distinctly a heavy thumping and slapping of bare feet on the stone floor outside, and several ejaculations in

hideously animal-sounding speech. The door of the cell rolled back, disclosing a sight that might have set any man's gorge rising.

A large throng of savages stood closely ringed round the entrance. Squatting as we were on the floor we could see the foremost of them at full length, and that sight amply confirmed me in an impression I had already formed that the savages were dwarfs. I do not think the tallest could have measured five feet in height, but as if to balance their short stature the breadth of the creatures was enormous; they looked almost as broad as they were long, and powerful as they were hideous.

While not so much as a loin-cloth clad them, it cannot be said they went naked. Their bodies were completely covered by gross black hair, even extending, so far as I could discern, to the palms of the hands. As for their faces, though apish and brute-like in contour, they were more repulsive than the countenances of any known ape; it was as though you had taken a great gorilla and transformed its dull, sullen, bestial air into one of the deepest active cunning and ferocity. The savages that confronted us carried, one and all, a straight knife about eighteen inches long and tapering to a needle-point.

A horrid jabbering arose; the creatures made signs to us to come out of the cell and follow them. Starkenden sprang to his feet, evidently determined to make a fight for it, but Gregory Hope at once thrust him aside.

"Not now!" he said sharply. "We may get mercy from the white men—we shall certainly get none from these animals. Better bide our time, Starkenden!"

The latter paused, dropped his manacled hands, and without a word crawled through the doorway of the cell. I saw him surrounded by a ring of five or six of the dwarfs, who turned the long needle-like knives in towards him but gave no sign of striking. Gregory Hope went next, and I followed. By this time the commotion seemed to have roused the old man in the corner; he stared wildly, and struggled after us on his hands and knees, and when the savages crowding in at the deep doorway pointed their knives to warn him back, he set up a piteous whimper. Then the door was rolled to, and we saw him no more.

I need scarcely say that my senses were very wide awake at this moment. I knew that our lives hung on a thread, but although Gregory and I had been likewise surrounded by a ring of steel as soon as we emerged, it appeared that the savages did not intend to kill us yet. In any case, to fight now would have been the merest madness—even without shackles on our wrists and ankles we should have stood no chance whatever against the knives. If we were to escape from these caves it would be at some time in the future, and with that consideration in mind I strained every sense to take in as much as possible of the lie of the land.

Our cell door I watched with particular curiosity as it was rolled to, and had no difficulty in understanding why I had been unable to make any impression upon one of those doors.

The great slab ran within two horizontal grooves most ingeniously and accurately chiselled out of the solid rock to receive it; on one hand it came to rest against a projecting jamb that must have been left for that purpose when the caves were hewn, and was prevented from sliding back by a stout stopper, square in shape, that fitted exactly into a recess in the wall of the cell. The door moved, apparently, on rollers of hard stone in the bed of the lower groove.

The rest of the rock chamber where we now found ourselves is soon described. It was about twenty yards long by ten broad, and not more than twelve feet high. There were rectangular openings at either end which appeared not to be fitted with doors of any kind. The cell from which we had emerged was clearly one of a series, for I saw seven or eight other doors in the same wall, all closed. The opposite wall was blank, except for a niche containing a lamp similar to the gruesome implement in our cell, and a rank of huge, blazing eyestones, each set in the rock wall, I fancy, mathematically in line with the venthole of each door.

The lamp burned like our own, with a reddish glimmer, but its dull light was so caught up and magnified and cast abroad by those mysterious gems that I could see all over the chamber without difficulty. That was the most astonishing feature about this cave. Before long, however, my astonishment over it was forgotten in the contemplation of much more amazing things.

A knife-prick warned me we were to move, also what direction we were to take, whereupon the three of us advanced as fast as our chained feet would permit, Gregory Hope first, myself next and

Starkenden bringing up the rear. We passed through one of those rectangular exits from the rock-chamber, then on into the caves; and it was then I began to experience a degree of amazement that for the time banished even terror from my mind.

The utmost I had expected to see was a system of tunnels. What I actually saw was a veritable underground city, a huge catacomb of halls and corridors, of stupendous proportions in themselves and covering a vast extent of ground space. The chamber outside our cell proved to be a mere cavern to the excavations into which we had soon come; and if these had been in the first place mere enlargements of caves naturally existing in the cliff, not a trace of the original rock-face remained to be seen. Everywhere the white limestone had been hewn out in great domes and cloisters and symmetrical arches, some of which could not have reached less than seventy or eighty feet from the smooth rock floor.

Not only had the interior been tooled; it was decorated over every square foot of its surface with sculptures which, as I distinctly remember, at once produced a most curious effect upon my mind: an impression, so to speak, of splendour gone awry. It was as though some magnificent work of art, by crafty and evil touches, had had all its pure beauty turned to brutality and baseness. Every carven figure I saw upon those limestone walls seemed to have been at the beginning as nobly and spaciously conceived as the halls themselves; yet every figure was superficially ugly, many were bestial, some indescribably weird. Later on we were to gather a hint as to how that strangely contradictory phenomenon had arisen.

MORE amazing yet—though we were in some degree prepared for this now—was the way these endless naves and transepts were illuminated. One method prevailed throughout, and that was the one we had seen in the rock-chamber outside our cell; the sole difference being that whereas there the eyestones were set in a blank wall, apparently for the devilish purpose of enhancing the terrors of the miserable victims confined opposite, here the gems fulfilled a decorative function only. Each sculptured face on the walls—and there must have been thousands of sculptured faces—had had sunk into it a pair of cut eyestones for eyes.

The effect was more than amazing: it was magic. Not only did those gems everywhere swell the glimmer of the skull-lamps into an endless conflagration of flashing, blazing light; they created a most eerie illusion that the whole roof and walls of every chamber were being swarmed over by live, alert figures—shapes which glared always, and sometimes looked as if they were in the very act to spring.

This, then, was the mysterious gem-field which had lured first Starkenden's brother, then Starkenden himself and us with him to destruction. Here was the measureless wealth of which we had dreamed, here under our very hands—and as hopeless of attainment as if it had been in another planet.

If the splendour and extent of the caves amazed me, hardly less did the numerical strength of their inhabitants. We saw hundreds and hundreds of the creatures, of a uniform dwarfish stature and startling hideousness; and though they drew aside as our escort brought us along, we were near enough to realise that all we saw were males. At one point of our advance we came to a large hall out of which ran many broad corridors, apparently furnished with bays and inlets throughout.

This region I took to be the living quarters of the dwarfs, and from the fact that I never once, during the whole of our captivity in the caves, saw a dwarf that I could confidently pronounce to be a female or a child of the tribe, I assumed that this strange half-animal race were accustomed to keep their families segregated—as is, I believe, often the way of savage tribes. Perhaps the most curious, certainly the most uncanny feature about the dwarfs we saw was the way they moved from place to place. It was not a human gait at all, but a furtive, jerky motion, a few steps at a time, then halt, then forward again, like an insect that is being watched.

One incident of our progress I shall call attention to here, as it bears somewhat closely upon the rest of my narrative. We passed on our left hand the mouth of a corridor down which came a heavy, muffled roaring. We could see a considerable way into this passage before it wound out of sight, and there seemed to me to be thrown upon its walls a light strangely distinct from the light that filled the rest of the caves. It was a pure white light.

Another point struck me at once: I remembered that up to the time we reached this corridor there had been a palpable draught upon our backs, and that the

flames of the skull-lamps, which were quite naked, bent steadily in the direction we were going. After we passed it, however, the draught was in our faces, and the lamp-flames leaned one and all towards the end of that corridor again. From these facts it was easy enough to infer the existence of a large fire, kindled no doubt for the purpose of drawing in fresh air from the openings in the cliff face and ventilating the caves, which without some device of the kind would have become uninhabitable.

We came at last to a wide, high-domed hall, exactly square, lit by four skull-lamps in niches of the walls and hundreds of blazing eyestones in the carven heads. There was a curtained recess on the farther side, through which I could discern another chamber less brightly illuminated. The bodyguard of dwarfs, who had preserved throughout our progress the same ring-formation, now dropped to their knees, though still surrounding us with that inexorable circle of cold steel. Then the curtain drew aside, and three figures emerged.

The first was Simbok, sullen and impassive as ever; he scarcely deigned to look at us. Next came the gigantic form of Ducros. His appearance, as he stalked coolly in and stood resting on his rifle in an attitude which I had grown to recognise as habitual with him, staggered me not a little, for even now I was barely able to credit his appalling treachery to us. But the third figure literally set my pulses tingling. I heard Gregory Hope, who was near to me, give an involuntary gasp, and I believe I uttered a like sound myself.

It was long since we had encountered this man at close quarters, and we had seen him only for an instant then; but as he halted on the shadowy threshold of the chamber and its light half illuminated his face, we might have been transported back to a certain lamp-lit room in Yokohama, staring at a strange countenance that stared through the window at us. Here, at last, was the elusive Coningham we had pursued so far, who now had us in his power to spare or slay. And as I looked on that cold, statuesque face, handsome and devilish together, its upper half framed in the ghost-like white hair, I knew there was little mercy to be expected.

FARTHER along the line in which we had been ranged there sounded a sudden agitated clink of fetters, and Starkenden's voice boomed out.

"You fiend!" he shouted till the echoes rang. "You fiend! Give me back my girl!"

Not a muscle of Coningham's face moved, not a syllable he uttered. Ducros raised the rifle slightly, then remained still, scanning us with a contemptuous scowl.

Coningham waited till the last echo had died away. Then he fixed his cold, glittering, snake-like eyes on our leader, and spoke. The mere sound of his voice was startling. He used English, but the words were strange, rasping, guttural, unlike the accent of any foreigner I ever heard speak English. The only thing with which I could compare it was the utterance of the old man in our cell. But the words themselves gave me a shock more violent still.

"Esau Starkenden," he said, "do you know me?"

There was tense silence, broken at last by a faint "Yes."

At first I thought Starkenden had spoken—yet the sound seemed to have come from somewhere nearer me. I looked at Gregory Hope.

He was staring at me, curiously alert. His lips moved.

"Yes," I heard him whisper again.

I fancy Starkenden heard also, for he started, shot a quick glance towards us, then studiously turned his gaze away. Then in a flash I knew what Gregory had said and what he meant by it. He was thinking of a note sent to me by Starkenden many weeks ago, a note which appeared to have been composed in great haste—perhaps even great agitation—and was very ambiguously initialled with the letters "E. S." Those were the syllables Gregory had uttered now.

Again Coningham's harsh, blood-chilling tones sounded across the silence.

"Do you know me, Esau Starkenden?" he repeated.

Starkenden raised his manacled hands in a gesture of impotent fury. "I know you!" he hissed. "If these hands were free you should know me too!"

"Have you seized the opportunity I have just given you? Do your poor dupes know me?"

"My friends know you, and being decent civilized men they would cheerfully help me rid the earth of such a viper!"

Coningham looked keenly at us. "Is it true, Crayton? Is that true, Hope?" he asked. "Think before you answer, for your lives may depend on what you say."

Gregory stepped forward a short pace.

In an instant Ducros' rifle was levelled, but I did not notice Gregory flinch, though the giant kept him covered, finger on trigger, all the while he was speaking.

"Coningham," said Gregory, "I am no self-appointed hangman, and I never killed a man yet—though men have tried to kill me before today. I would not kill you in cold blood, not if we had that rifle and these filthy savages to back us. But it might interest you to know there are warrants for your arrest all up and down the coast, and that if ever it came in my power to do so I would certainly hand you over to the punishment your crime deserves. And as a private matter, I would flog you within an inch of your life for bringing Miss Marah Starkenden within a hundred miles of this hellhole. Where is she now, you damned coward?"

"Fools!" thundered Coningham, raising his arm for the first time and stretching a long forefinger towards us. "Are your eyes not opened yet? Does that name you have just heard suggest nothing to you? Then know the truth from me now. There is no such person as Coningham. There never has been. *My name is Jacob Starkenden. I am the blood brother of that shivering liar who stands beside you!"*

CHAPTER VII

THE NAKED TRUTH

FOR several moments the bright-lit interior of that chamber grew dim for me; everything seemed to swim around in filmy grey waves; and I could hear no sound but a furious drumming of my own heart. So long had we been living with the shadow of Coningham before our eyes, so complete was the picture of him which Starkenden had built up, that the man had become as real to us as our leader himself, and never for one instant had it occurred to us to doubt the latter's existence.

I stared in utter bewilderment from this man who called himself Jacob Starkenden to the man who from the day we met him had called himself Abel.

It was impossible to gather from the face of our Starkenden whether these charges were true or false; his eyes blazed red as the glaring eyestones of the chamber, his enormous bearded chin jerked convulsively up and down, his clenched hands shook until the fetters upon them rattled like castanets.

"You fiend!" he howled again and again. "You cunning fiend! Give me back my girl!"

The other broke into a laugh that froze my blood. "Have no fear!" he hissed. "She is near you now, and she shall never be far from you again. It is I who will be far away. Think upon it, reflect upon it while you lie in your cell, that she is close at hand. The thought should comfort you!"

I saw the self-styled Jacob Starkenden make a sudden gesture to the savages surrounding the self-styled Abel. Immediately they leapt to their feet. There followed talk in the hideous guttural language of the caves, whereupon the savages made as if to hurry Esau Starkenden away. For one instant the latter seemed determined to stand and meet his fate there, but thought better of it. He turned to Hope and me, shot a straight, meaning glance at us, and made a sign which we both saw and understood. A moment or two later he had disappeared by the way we came.

There was a long pause now, during which Jacob Starkenden seemed striving to regain his composure. At last he approached us, speaking to our guards and motioning them back to the open doorway behind. There they gathered on their knees, with knives significantly pointed in our direction, while Ducros remained half covering us with his rifle.

"Hope and Crayton," said Jacob Starkenden in cooler tones, "you have now heard the truth, or at least a part of it. From Ducros I have also heard something of what the black-hearted villain who was my brother told you. He has apparently lied to you since the day you were unlucky enough to cross his path. But I wish to know exactly how far he has lied. You see the justice of that?"

We remained silent.

"Come now," persisted Jacob Starkenden grimly, "it will pay you to be as frank with me as I am with you, since the strings are all in my hands. You would not have entered upon this affair without hearing something about it beforehand. What did that scoundrel tell you?"

Gregory began to speak, but checked himself at once. "We gave our word not to repeat it," he said shortly, "so that you will hear nothing of the matter from me."

"But at least he told you something of his family affairs?"

"At the same time as the rest. I take the one pledge of secrecy to cover both."

An evil smile gradually overspread Jacob Starkenden's face. "Cunning!" he said. "A search for hidden gems would naturally

demand secrecy. But if a man's family affairs had to be treated in the same way, it might arouse suspicion. So Brother Esau lumps the two together and exacts a pledge—perhaps even an oath—that both shall be kept secret. Cunning—and worthy of a scoundrel whose whole life has been built up on selfishness and fraud!"

He paused, staring ahead of him as if to marshal his ideas. "Listen, Crayton and Hope," he continued at length, "I am going to tell you the truth now. I am not obliged to do so, but I have no wish to see you throw your lives away through believing too long in a lie. Listen closely.

"We two, Esau Starkenden and I, are sons of a family which has been settled in the south of England for over a thousand years. Brother Esau told Ducros, and no doubt told you also, that we were twins, but he lied there, even as he lied over our names. He was the elder son, and he was born hairy and misshapen. Our father, in a fit of whimsical disgust, named him Esau. When I was born a few years later I received the name of Jacob, and it was towards me that my father's love always inclined; he detested Esau, whose evil soul was truly reflected in his hideous face and form.

"My father did not divide up the family inheritance between us. He left the whole, lands and money, to me. All Esau received was two old heirlooms, an Eastern mariner's compass and a gem, which were the only part of the family possessions subject to entail. Esau feigned to take the loss of the property in good part—he had no call to do otherwise, really, for after our father's death, when the will was proved and I found I was practically sole heir, I drew up in Esau's favour a deed of gift by which there passed to him at once enough of the investments to make him comfortably-off.

"But that was not enough for his accursed greed. He had got on the track of an old legend, of which he told you, telling how a remote ancestor of ours, one Wulf Starkenden, sailed away to the Eastern seas and brought back the compass and the eyestone with him.

"He had already made a thoroughly mercenary marriage, and a girl child had been born, his wife dying in giving it birth. Brother Esau had little compunction at leaving that child behind, for when once he had got hold of the manuscript of Wulf Starkenden his greed seemed to rob him of even common sanity. He spoke of the affair as if it were merely a matter of landing on the coast and striking up country till he came to the gem-field.

"I used every argument I could think of to dissuade him. I declared the whole thing was wild and fantastic, much likelier to swallow up what money he had than to add more to it, and offered to settle still more of my investments on him if he would drop the idea. In the end there was a violent quarrel.

"BROTHER Esau reproached me with wishing him to remain poor—if I was genuinely anxious for him to take his proper place in the world, he said, let me restore the whole of the inheritance I had filched from him. But I had not filched the inheritance, and I could not give him the Starkenden lands, for with the lands went headship of the family. Esau then changed his tactics. He urged me to help him search for this supposed treasure-field, and offered me a half share of the profits—which by rights, he pointed out, would be all his, since he had inherited the clew to them and discovered the additional evidence by his own efforts alone. I thought then that his motive was merely to have someone with him who would bear all the heavy expenses of travel, and thus save his tender pocket. I know better now. I have seen, and I would swear it before God, that already there had taken shape in his black heart the notion of murder. I was unmarried—he would be sole heir to the family wealth in the event of my death. He dared not kill me in civilized lands—he feared for his own neck. But on a lonely expedition into a wild Eastern country—who knew what chances might not crop up there?

"In the end I gave way, hoping that a few months' fruitless search would be enough to clear his mind of the delusion for ever. Events fell out much as I had anticipated they would. We toured this side of Asia, up and down the coast, sometimes inland, and though we learned a good deal about gem-bearing regions, we never heard of one which the prospectors had not already discovered and tapped. I had actually arranged to go home when outside the small coast town of Vinh, we encountered the trader, Royce, with his story of a hidden river and gems of a rather strange type.

"It seemed to me, of course, a very strange coincindence that of all the foreigners on that coast, we two should be fated to meet Royce just in time to hear the tale before he died. To Brother Esau

it seemed more than coincidence. He regarded it as confirmation of all the wild notions he had come to harbour. He was now in a perfect frenzy of greed—nothing would satisfy him but we should go inland from that point at once. I consented to cancel my passage home and accompany him, and after a few days we set out. It was a barren quest, however. We followed Royce's directions as best we could, but when we came to the territory where the mountain range and the mysterious river should have been, we found dense jungle, and though we struck out many miles in every direction we found nothing else. Royce, I may say, had been more than half raving with fever for the few hours he remained alive after we met him, and even Esau was beginning to regard his story of a gem-field and a hidden river as pure delirium.

"But then a likelier chance of becoming rich occurred to him. One night we were attacked by savages—such savages as I had thought up to that time existed only in story books. They were not a numerous band, however, and they were armed only with clubs; I have since learned that they do not use the long knife on these sallies, as their object is to take victims alive. You need only to look behind you to see the long knife and the savages I refer to.

"Our native bearers fled. Only one—and he is here to bear me out, if you doubt my tale—put up anything of a fight. I shot two or three of the savages; then, before I could reload, was borne down in a rush by several more.

"Brother Esau was standing alone some yards away, rifle in hand. But he did not shoot. Nor did he come to my aid. He called off Simbok, who had shaken himself free and was about to lend me a hand, and the pair of them ran together.

"What happened to them then I have only learned from Simbok recently. Brother Esau promised him a heavy bribe to keep his mouth shut as to what had really taken place, and to stick to Esau's story, which he concocted as they made their way down country. This lying version of the affair he gave out to the French authorities on the coast, and to make it the more plausible he was obliged to undertake an expedition to search for me. The French military party soon tired of the quest—which seemed hopeless—and Brother Esau wanted no persuasion to drop it either. He returned to Europe, claimed the Starkenden estates as next of kin and, after a lawsuit, got possession of them. For this last piece of information I have been indebted to Ducros.

"I, meantime, had been brought to these caves. I shall not go into detail with you as to my position here—the facts are so strange and incredible that you would be unable to believe them. I will tell you this much, however: never once in all the sixteen years I remained here was I allowed to set foot outside the caves or see the light of day. Now do you wonder my hair is white? I see from your faces that you think I am mad. I am. No man could remain shut up in this place for sixteen years without losing his reason. But I am sane enough to grasp my revenge now that it has come to me!

"Events which also I shall not explain to you then caused a total change in the situation here. I was released, on a certain condition. I left the river and made for the coast. But my knowledge of the interior had never been clear, and it was hazier than ever now, after sixteen years of a living death. I went much farther south than there was need—yet it was a lucky accident for my plans. I stumbled upon Ducros in the jungle near his village. He was out hunting, and had only Simbok with him. From Ducros I found out many things regarding Brother Esau's recent movements.

"It appears his conscience had never left him at rest since the day he virtually murdered me. The fear always haunted him that I was *not* dead, but in captivity, and that sooner or later I should escape to expose him. There seems to have grown up in his mind, also, a suspicion that the savages who attacked us were in some way connected with that legendary gem-field. In the end he was drawn to the East again. But do not fancy it was any desire to rescue me that drew him. Partly it was his accursed greed, and partly his black conscience.

"He could not bear to hear himself and me spoken of as Esau and Jacob. That would be a maddening reminder of the past, and might also hint to others the true relationship between us. Yet if he took a totally different name, perhaps someone who had met him on his former visit to the East might recognize his hideous face and remember he bore a Biblical name before—and smell a rat. That is why, I think, when Esau encountered Ducros a year ago he was already announcing himself as Abel Starkenden in search of his brother Felix—two persons as mythical as the Coningham he told you of.

"HE ARRIVED in the French territories a second time, then, sought out Simbok in one of the coast towns, and made a new expedition up counrty. Again he was obliged to return empty-handed. But this time he had searched more widely, and went so far south that he struck Ducros' village, and learned that Ducros was a fixture in that locality, offered him a retaining fee to keep on the lookout for information. The version of our affair which he gave Ducros was, of course, the false one he had trumped up. He again bribed Simbok to stick to this lying tale, and left him at Ducros' village, where he was very well content to remain; and Simbok faithfully kept his side of the black bargain until I arrived a month or two back and told Ducros the truth. Then Simbok confessed everything, and Ducros, who is an honest man, at once agreed to help me.

"We laid our plans there in the jungle, alone. Ducros knew the address in Yokohama where Esau was now living with his daughter, who had come out to keep house for him during his stay. I went down country first, with Simbok only, left him at the hut near Nam Hoa, and made my way to Japan. Ducros followed us at the coast, joined Simbok, and waited there for my return.

"Meanwhile I was busy in Yokohama. I found Brother Esau's house, and before long saw Esau. It was as much as I could do to refrain from killing him there and then, but I held back. I had no wish to hang for such a reptile, and our plans provided for a much cleaner vengeance. Simbok had posted Ducros' letter to Esau as soon as we reached Nam Hoa—that letter which Ducros and I had composed together in the jungle near his village. It was worded with great care. It laid much more stress on the existence of the gem-field than on the possibility of a white man being still held in captivity there.

"Esau, at first, made no move. This puzzled me—for I knew he had not grown less avaricious with the years. I then took a considerable risk. For the first time I allowed Esau to catch sight of me. You will no doubt recollect the occasion. The scoundrel recognized me at once, and did what I expected he would. He fled for his life, and as I backed swiftly away from that window, Hope and Crayton, I heard Brother Esau scream.

"I easily found the route he had taken. He was going south, apparently making for Ducros—therefore he had not connected us, one with the other. He knew I had escaped, perhaps from the gem-country, but it had not occurred to him that I might have met Ducros on the way.

"Now, with me left behind in Yokohama, was Brother Esau's chance to dash south and discover the gem-country without encountering me at all. But he had reckoned without the main item of my plan. On the following day I travelled south too, with Marah Starkenden. For reasons I need not explain to you, she was perfectly willing to accompany me."

"Why did she accompany you?" broke in Gregory.

"That is not for you to know," said Jacob Starkenden sternly. "But here she is, and here she will now remain—forever!"

We stood staring at him in horrified amazement.

"I need not detail our voyage and our journey," he continued. "I took great risks, but everything played into my hands as though the heavens were willing to help me to my revenge. Brother Esau behaved very cunningly in Kobe, but I undercut him. Though you little suspected it, I was well aware the three of you were skulking on board the *Hinoiri Maru;* and when I took passage in the ship you had just left, and saw she would pass out of the harbour close to the ship you were now on, I made a point of being well in view, in the hope that Esau would see. I have since learned that that device was successful, and you know how your attempt to arrest me in Hongkong failed. I had not anticipated, indeed, that Esau would dare to call in the police, but I am glad he did, for it proves that even that selfish villain has some traces of natural feeling for his own daughter. That will help him to appreciate better the poignancy of the situation here."

"What do you intend to do with him?"

"Nothing whatever. Brother Esau has already passed out of my hands. He belongs to the folk of these caves now, the Ktawrh, as they call themselves. They are superstitious creatures, and have not yet abandoned practices and beliefs that are obsolete in the outer world. From time to time—it occurs usually once a year—the river rises. It has never yet reached as high as the entrances to these caves, but the Ktawrh fear that some day it may. There is a very ancient tradition among them that if that happens their race will cease to exist, and that in order to avert the catastrophe they must sacrifice men unlike themselves to the god of the caves

and the river. The more dissimilar the sacrifice, the more efficacious it is supposed to be.

"It is an unpleasant ceremony, I may tell you, and I was conscious of it being performed near me for sixteen years—though there were years when the rains failed and the river rose little, and there was no sacrifice. All that time, Hope and Crayton, I remained in doubt whether or not I should be added to the victims myself—it is one of many things that have contributed to drive me mad. But as you see, I have escaped. Perhaps I have to thank the special position I occupied here—at all events, the Ktawrh would probably not have turned upon me unless hard pressed. They economize in their victims, keeping the best till the last. That may give Brother Esau a year or two of respite, perhaps many years, and it is my earnest prayer that he will suffer all the tortures of horror and suspense that I suffered during the sixteen years I was imprisoned through treachery."

Jacob Starkenden paused, his features writhing into a ghastly smile of triumph.

"But it remains to be decided what shall be done with you two," he went on. "If you are no self-appointed hangman, Hope, I at least am no common cutthroat. I have no quarrel with you whatever, since you appear to have been merely the dupes of my brother. Therefore I am offering you a proposal for your safety. When Ducros and I leave these caves we shall proceed to Europe. You may have noticed in travelling with Ducros that he is a rather diligent student of English. He undertook those studies partly to render himself more efficient as my ally, and partly to qualify himself for the life of a country gentleman in England.

"A friendship, I may say, has sprung up between us, and I owe him a great debt for his loyalty and the very clever way he has shepherded Brother Esau up country. In future Ducros and I will live together on my estate, which I shall now claim, and there I hope and believe he will be safe from inquiries as to his previous relations with an overseas regiment of the French Army.

"Your part will be to swear an oath to remain silent forever both about me and about Ducros. If you consent, I can free you from the Ktawrh—my power here now will be equal to that. And we can, out of the wealth of these caves, make you rich men to the end of your days, fabulously rich, so that you may settle in what part of the world you will, and enjoy every luxury the world has to offer. You might some day even care to visit Ducros and myself at Starkenden Abbey, in Hampshire, where we should be able to talk over old times and wonder what is happening to Brother Esau in these caves. It should be an amusing speculation, for when the time comes to sacrifice him, he will have much to distress his soul. The sacrifice itself is not a pleasant thing to look forward to, and the preliminary ceremony will be worse. Part of it will be for Brother Esau to be presented to his own daughter, who will send him away to death—without knowing who he is."

AS WE listened to this astounding recital it was impossible to believe Jacob Starkenden sane. And yet, from the cold, logical, matter-of-fact way he told his tale it was equally impossible to doubt that we were now hearing the truth. That added much to the grim horror of the scene. For the best part of a minute we stood staring at Jacob Starkenden in silence.

Then Gregory Hope began to speak. Hope is the last man in the world ever to indulge in heroics, but his tones now rang out loudly and with a lot more conviction than I ever heard an actor mouth noble sentiments on the dramatic stage.

"Jacob Starkenden," he said, "or whatever you please to call yourself, listen to me. I have always thought up to the present that I was a sane man and a gentleman. From what you have just said, I should suppose you thought me a criminal lunatic like yourself. Well, I am not. It is no business of mine to hold the scales between you and your brother. If he has wronged you, if he is a selfish scoundrel and a virtual murderer, I cannot see that you are much better. Also you seem to leave out of consideration Miss Marah Starkenden, a harmless girl who has been dragged into a quarrel more fit for wild beast than men. So this is my answer to your proposal. I will see you and your partner damned in the hottest corner of hell before I will lend you one jot of support!"

"That's my answer too!" I cried.

Again Jacob Etarkenden's features writhed into a ghastly smile. "You realize the consequences of your refusal?" he hissed.

"Whatever they may be," retorted Gregory, "I hope we shall be able to face them like gentlemen."

At this point Ducros stepped forward

and spoke for the first time. "One moment, friend Estarkenden," he said. "They are dam-fool, these two—dam-fool and sentimental. You should understand dealing with your countrymen, but you do not so." He then turned to us. "You, Hope," he said, "do not you see you speak like silly boy? How can this Estarkenden set you free if you go straight to English consul to get him in trouble? If you not come in with us it is require to stop your mouth, my friend, so you go to White Tiger! And why are you to take sides of that other Estarkenden? Have he not give up his own brother to living death? Now he get living death for himself, and one day he get real dead death, and it serve him right way, by dam!"

"Ducros," said Gregory, "you may have been a traitor to us, but you are at least sane. You were once a soldier, and I know you are a brave man. Will you *run* away and leave an innocent girl in the clutches of these filthy dwarfs?"

Ducros shrugged his gigantic shoulders as if totally callous to any such consideration, yet I fancy the shot had told for all that.

He said, "It make no difference each way you have it. That girl she has drunk—"

Jacob Starkenden leapt toward him, his hand raised. "Silence, fool!" he thundered.

Ducros' next move was a swift one, and a startling. Unobtrusively he turned the rifle straight at the breast of Jacob Starkenden. And Ducros' hand was on the trigger-guard.

"Silence to you, my friend," he said very quietly and very quickly. "Do not you make one signal to those dam savage or I let daylight in you, by damn ! And I tell you this rifle he is load, and he is not set safety this time, and I never miss the aim in my life yet! I will speak to an end, my friend."

There was an electric silence.

"You, Hope," continued Ducros, "you miss good chance here. I say you are dam-fool and sentimental. You also do not comprehend position. That girl she has drunk more medicine which is prepare by very old fellow in these cave. This Estarkenden he give her that medicine in secret, and she have no memory of all thing happening before. And she will not have for ever. It is devil's medicine, I tell you, and this Estarkenden he call it wine of forgetting, which is translate from name that dam very old priest give. So what good for that girl going back to the world? That world he is all dead for her now, and even if her memory come again after many year, what good to be out there when her father is in these cave or else gone to White Tiger?

"It is no good, I tell you. And this Estarkenden he is not such dam-fool to let her go, for he fear she have back the memory some day and get him in trouble like you. And do not think I am always bad fellow, my friend. I was soldier as you say, and my comrade steal my wife. I kill him very quick, by dam! With these hands I break him in piece—so! And I have to run from that army or they kill me too. Where can I go? I live hiding in jungle like the wild beast, and I care not great deal what happen to me. If it is not for that other Estarkenden, who is very great scoundrel and brother-killer too, I am taking no part in this thing at all. But I am not dam-fool. These Estarkenden offer much money both, and this one has also the right on his side.

"But if you refuse, what happen, this Estarkenden leave you in tender mercy of these savage, and in time you go to White Tiger. That is your fault, my friends. Now I have done my speaking, Estarkenden, and I think you ask these fellow once more if they join in on right side."

Jacob Starkenden paused for a considerable while, as if debating with himself.

"Hope and Crayton," he said at last, "are you prepared to accept my terms?"

"You have already had my answer," returned Gregory without hesitation.

"And mine too," I said as firmly as I could—though I fear it was not very firmly.. The persistent mention of the White Tiger had brought back to my mind that roaring, bright-lit corridor we had passed on the way here. I remembered Moloch of the Old Testament, and felt physically sick in the contemplation of a shadowy horror that was fast crystallising out into a reality.

Jacob Starkenden strode past us, addressing several words to the savages in the doorway, whereupon they darted in, surrounded us as before, and led us away.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL THESE THINGS WILL I GIVE THEE

GREATLY to our surprise, Gregory Hope and I were not taken back to the chamber from which we had come, but to another. Where precisely it lay in the vast labyrinth of the caves I could not tell then, and have never been

able to picture in my mind since, for there was a baffling similarity about those endless halls and corridors and sculptured arches and domes, and the blazing eyestones that were everywhere.

I can be certain, however, that our new prison was a good deal nearer than the other to that hall where we held the fateful interveiw with Jacob Starkenden, because of the shorter time we took to reach it; and I distinctly remember that in getting there we did not again pass the corridor where we had seen that curious white light and heard the distant roar. Apparently we were now on another main artery running through the caves—a fact which still further deepened my astonishment at their huge extent.

Internally, our new chamber differed from the other in one or two ways. I could not help thinking that those cells near the mouth of the caves were prisons pure and simple, used by the Ktawrh only for the miserable victims they brought in from the outer world; the single doors pointed that way, as did the horrible red eye, set so as to glare through each.

This chamber where we now found ourselves was larger and loftier; the door was similarly engineered, but the venthole was bigger, and looked out on to no eyestone in particular—though the sculptured wall opposite bore many small eyestones; a sort of rough rock bench lined the side walls; the roof was carved in low relief with figures that were at once shapely and revolting, and in the wall facing the one through which we had entered there was a second door.

I assumed then that this chamber must be of the pattern commonly occupied by the Ktawrh as living quarters. Later on, I had reason to believe that its original purpose was far otherwise: that it had served as a priest's hermitage at some dim age in the dawn of human history. But of the circumstances under which I gathered that notion I shall write in my next chapter.

Hope and I threw ourselves down on to the rock benches—which were apparently beds, though devoid of any covering—and stared at one another by the light of the one skull-lamp.

"What can this mean?" I muttered at last.

"God knows!" returned Gregory. "But I'm not altogether sorry for the separation."

Nor was I. I felt I did not wish to set eyes on Esau Starkenden at that moment or any time in the future. Jacob Starkenden might be the criminal lunatic Gregory called him, but there could no longer be any doubt as to who had been the criminal at the beginning of things. It was all so clear now.

As I sat there in silence, fact after fact recurred to me which lent vivid colour to the charges we had heard. No wonder Esau Starkenden's behavior had been queer on the night we left Yokohama; if he had then just seen the brother he so foully wronged, whom for sixteen years he had believed safely out of the way, well might he quake with terror and the stabs of a black conscience. No wonder he had taken us at once so fully into his affairs.

Now I understood the reason—the true reason, not the sham one he had judged expedient to give us on the following morning. Jacob Starkenden had appeared; there was danger of our guessing the truth at any moment, and Esau Starkenden knew that if we did so, we should drop him very quickly. Therefore he must lose no time in inoculating our minds with his false story, so hypocritically sincere, so well circumstantiated, so craftily prefaced with the long discourse on the Starkenden legend. That part of his tale apparently contained elements of truth, and was all the more dangerous because of it.

From Kobe to Haiphong, of course, Starkenden had been skating on very thin ice, for he must have realized that if he succeeded in arresting "Coningham" the whole truth would have to come out. Yet Starkenden had more to gain than to lose by it. While his brother could prove no actual crime against him, he could prove against his brother a very serious crime indeed. He would have no difficulty in seeing Jacob Starkenden into gaol, perhaps for a long sentence, and could then continue his search for the gem-field unhindered.

But "Coningham" got through, and from that point forward it must have looked to Esau Starkenden as if he could carry off the whole affair without ever betraying himself. He had evidently intended, when we came up with "Coningham", to shoot him on sight. If that calculated murder had become a fact, the rest of us would never have learned the truth at all, so far as Starkenden was then to know. We could hardly have learned it from Marah Starkenden. At the time her uncle left England she had been only two years old, and would certainly not remember well enough to identify him.

Indeed, we had seen for ourselves that

she did not recognise him when he appeared at the window of the house in Yokohama, and we had told Esau Starkenden as much. The latter could not guess, of course, how "Coningham" had contrived the abduction, but with "Coningham" dead it would be a perfectly simple matter for him to convince her and us that anything "Coningham" may have said to her was a mere tissue of falsehood trumped up for the purpose of getting her away from her friends.

Of Esau Starkenden's avarice we had seen proof and to spare. Very clearly there came back to my mind the council of war at the foot of the great cliff. I veritably believe Starkenden would then have had the impudence to propose that Ducros should receive no share of the prospective treasure trove, had not Ducros forestalled him with a plain hint of *his* intentions. Starkenden saved his face very cleverly. But Ducros was also behaving very cleverly just along then, and I fancy that if ever the French giant had been in doubt which of the Starkenden brothers to support, the conversation during that council of war would have decided him.

VIII

ALTOGETHER, Esau Starkenden seemed about as mean and cunning and heartless a scoundrel as could well be imagined, and our position was not rendered any happier by the reflection that we had blindly stuck to him in the teeth of a dozen warnings. And yet—and yet there was the abduction of Marah Starkenden. That would have taken place whether we had joined Starkenden or not. Somewhere in these awful caves the girl was imprisoned, and though Gregory Hope and I, prisoners ourselves, for the present looked a very unlikely pair of rescuers, if we had cried off the expedition we should at this moment be thousands of miles away and unable even to attempt anything for her sake.

Also, however false Esau Starkenden might have been to his own brother in the past, we were at least one with him in our desire to save his daughter from that brother now; and the Sign he gave as he was being led off reminded us that never could we honourably abandon him to any punishment which had not been meted out to him by an established court of law.

We had gathered from Jacob Starkenden and Ducros many hints regarding these caves and their occupants. The aged priest mentioned by Ducros must obviously be one and the same with that mysterious being called the Undying One. The reason of the annual sacrifices, the periodic sallies made by these savages from their sombre cañon to secure fresh victims, and the cult of the White Tiger—all had now become clearer to me, though upon the last point my ideas were still no more than vague and hideous suspicion.

We had also gained some clew to a matter that had been an insoluble mystery to us now for many weeks past—the amazing abduction of Marah Starkenden. It seemed incredible that any drug could exercise such influence as Ducros ascribed to the "Wine of Forgetting," yet for any other explanation of the way Marah Starkenden had accompanied "Coningham," with willingness and apparent good grace, I racked my brains in vain.

We had been in this new cell for several hours when Gregory Hope suddenly started up. He stepped to the door, looked out through the venthole, then turned and motioned me to follow him. The venthole was fully two inches across, and as I peered through it I could see, at some paces away, the top and half the back of a hairy black head. This apparently belonged to the dwarf left to watch our prison, and was so low down that I assumed the creature must be squatting on the rock floor.

"Stay here and block the hole," whispered Gregory, "and clink your fetters now and again."

"I did so, wondering what was coming next. The black head remained quite still. Gregory now stole across to the far side of the chamber. Still watching through the venthole I heard a curious faint rumble behind me, swung around, and to my utter amazement saw Gregory standing in front of a black square gap in the wall. He pointed to the lamp, then beckoned frantically to me. A few instants later the pair of us were outside the cell, in a corridor lit only by the lamp I carried.

"Now the door!" he muttered.

As quietly as possible we rolled it into position and blocked it with a stone stopper we found lying near by. Gregory gave a gasp of relief. "I was a pretty rich fool not to think of it before," he cried. "We might have been in the open air by now. Listen!"

Not a sound came to our ears. That might mean nothing, however; in the door we had just closed there was not even a venthole, and any sound on the other side, unless very loud, could easily be swallowed up in the thickness of the rock. For a mo-

ment more we stood staring at one another by the light of the skull-lamp. One thought was in both our minds—escape. Once out of the caves we could perhaps burst our fetters and make a dash for it down the river-bed and down country, possibly even get back with a rescue party in time to save Starkenden as well as his daughter. It was a wild, forlorn hope, but the only one.

Gregory lifted the lamp from where I had laid it while we shut the door, and peered along the tunnel. This differed entirely from any we had yet seen; the surface of the rock was smooth and plain, and clearly had no eyestones set in it at all—or the corridor would not have been pitch dark as it was.

"One thing," whispered Gregory. "This tunnel may branch. We must mark the wall as we go along, so that we can find our way back if there's no exit."

I felt in my pockets. The first object that fell under my hand was the old briar pipe I had used to tap out those Morse signals. Pressing on the rock wall with the rim of the bowl I gave it a slight turn. It left a faint circle of black.

"Good," muttered Gregory. "We shall know that at once, and others won't."

We advanced as swiftly as our trammelled feet would allow, following what we judged to be the direction of the cliff face, but hardly had we progressed twenty yards when we were brought up short against a blank wall—blank but not finished, for the rock bore innumerable cuts and clean gouges that must have been made with some very sharp and effective tool.

"As far as the workmen came, evidently," said Gregory Hope, handing me the lamp and running his fingers over the rock face. "And I fancy they weren't here yesterday, either, or even last century. This stuff's gone hard as iron."

"But what in the deuce did they stop short for?"

"That's a riddle, *amigo*, and we've no time to guess it. We must try the other way."

We were soon back at the point from which we set out. Still no sound came from beyond the closed door. It seemed our absence had not been noticed, perhaps because the dwarf on guard was asleep, or it might be the brilliant light in the corridor outside concealed the fact that our cell was now in darkness. In that case the Ktawrh would not know of our escape till next they opened the door to put in food.

We stole along the dark tunnel, blazing a trail with the rim of my pipe as we went. There was no cul-de-sac in this direction; on the contrary the passage soon branched into two, both exactly alike.

Gregory pointed to the right as the one farthest from our cell. But before we had advanced many yards along this passage it branched again. Gregory peered into each arm of the fork, then glanced anxiously at our lamp and dipped a finger into the small open well. I had already noticed that the utensil felt very light. My companion now reported he could not reach the oil with his finger at all. Wherever we were going we must go quickly, for it would be utterly hopeless to traverse this maze in the dark.

"Right once more, I think," he muttered quickly. "If that fails we'll hark back to the first fork and start afresh."

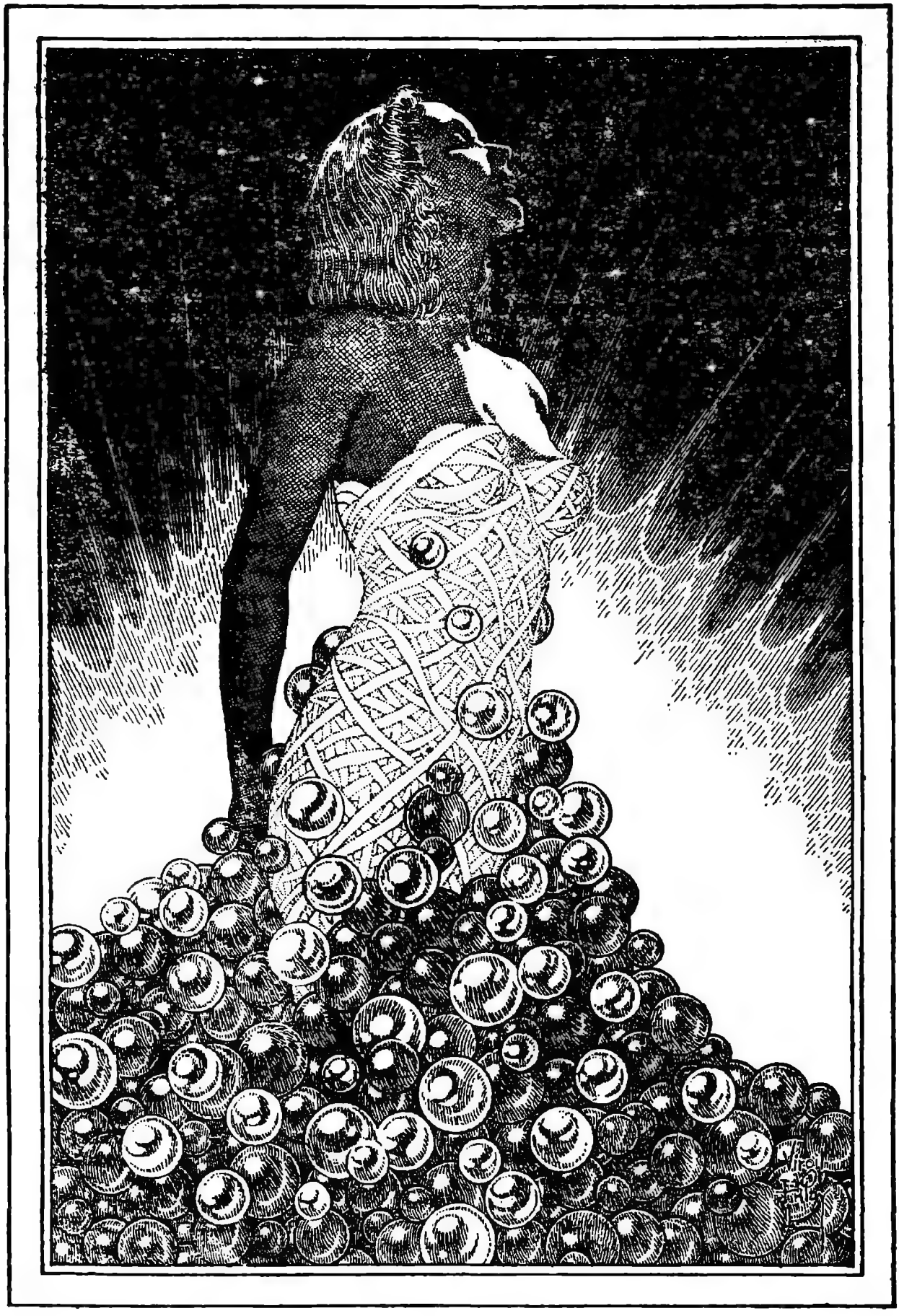
We had blazed seven or eight pipe-marks along the wall of this tunnel, I believe, before we were balked again by a dead end. But this time there was a difference—a highly intriguing one. From several paces off we had both seen that curious glinting light in the rock face near the floor. Gregory wrested a jack-knife from his pocket, knelt down and began to hack. But it was not the rock that broke away. It was the point of his knife, and the source of the light remained firmly imbedded as ever. Exactly how big that eyestone was we were never to know; the exposed surface alone measured a full inch across, and rough and encrusted with impurities as it was, gave out an astonishing quantity of light.

"So here is where the things came from!" I gasped. "This must be the mine!"

Gregory nodded. "And that's why the tunnels twist so, by the look of it," he said. "I suppose the miners followed the best yield, and stopped if it petered out. They must have been able to pick and choose to leave this fellow behind. Pity we can't get him—he might have helped quite a bit."

WE NOW harked back to the first fork, and tried again and again to discover an outlet. At last, after fully half an hour's rapid search, we entered a tunnel which not only continued for a long distance without branching, but soon became wider and loftier than any we had yet explored. It seemed unquestionably the main thoroughfare into this amazing mine.

I need hardly say that we now advanced with extreme caution, making as little noise with our fetters as possible and



The recess in the wall contained a human figure—the body of a woman!

pausing often to listen, but we could hear no sound; indeed, the tremendous paralyzing silence was an experience in itself—to my fretted senses it seemed literally to cling around us like something solid. Then suddenly we both distinguished a faint light far ahead. A minute or two later we were at the end of that corridor and into a broad chamber beyond. We saw that the entrance was furnished with one of the great stone doors, but our gaze was immediately drawn away from this. What we were staring at was a recess in the floor to our right hand, a rectangular well about six feet long by four broad, which appeared to have a fire burning in it.

That was evidently the origin of the light we had seen from afar, but whereas the light had then looked bluish, now it was of a pronouncedly red tinge. And there was no smoke in this chamber, or any suspicion of heat; the atmosphere was dank-chill and stagnant as it had been throughout this region of the caves.

For the moment even our fierce longing to escape was forgotten. We shuffled eagerly across to that well in the rock floor. Its appearance changed swiftly as we approached; its light grew redder and shone brighter. Long before we reached it we had realised that it contained no fire at all. That rectangular well was almost full of eyestones, and as we stood on the brink and held our lamp directly above, the light cast up by those hundreds and hundreds of invaluable gems actually set my eyes streaming.

"The store-house of the mine," cried Gregory, backing away from the intolerable light. "There's more wealth here than some nations possess. Doesn't get us any nearer daylight, though—"

He broke off, staring across the chamber. I followed the direction of his gaze, and saw something which I had not noticed when we entered and the light was dim. But now, with the entire place in a red glare, there appeared in the rock wall opposite us another deep recess, as it were a combined niche and bier; and as we drew near we perceived that it contained a human figure, the body of a woman wrapped from feet to shoulders in fine lawn and exhaling a faint, mystic perfume the like of which I had never encountered before. I staggered back. Gregory Hope uttered a cry like a man in sudden anguish. He was kneeling and peering into that recess, his face pale and deathly as the face before him.

There we remained for fully a minute, frozen dumb with horror. Then suddenly Gregory sprang to his feet, with round, staring eyes. He bounded across to where we had left the lamp, tripping over the fetters and falling twice in his frenzy of eagerness. He brought back the lamp, together with a handful of eyestones, while I watched him closely, a hideous fear taking shape in my mind that the shock had driven him out of his.

Gregory knelt again with his head thrust into the recess, holding the lamp in one hand and the eyestones in the other. Now for the first time we saw the interior of that excavation clearly throughout, and the body of the dead woman, though she was some six feet distant from us, was bathed in a light so bright and ruddy that for my part I could scarce believe she was dead.

Gregory trembled violently from head to foot, then turned upon me a face in which bewilderment was mingled with a dawning, unspeakable relief.

"It is not Marah!" he muttered hoarsely. "I was right. It is not Marah!"

I gaped at him, then at the face in the niche before us.

"That woman is not Marah Starkenden!" he cried. "I'll swear it! Marah has a very faint scar under her lower lip. That woman has none!"

"Then who can it be?" I gasped, now trembling from head to foot myself.

"God knows! Let me think!"

He rested the lamp and the gems on the edge of the bier, and buried his face in his manacled hands. When he stood up a few moments later his features were still pale and drawn.

"No go, *amigo,*" he said shortly. "It's a riddle—and the biggest I've ever struck by a heap. Come, let's get out."

We made a scrupulous examination of the walls, but soon saw that beyond the door through which we had entered there was only one other, and that was shut fast from the farther side. We were still heaving frantically upon it when with a sudden puff our lamp went out. The change that came over the chamber was more than startling, it was uncanny; immediately the bright red light around us, as if by some strange magic of the illusionist's art, veered to a wan blue—the baleful emanation from that great heap of gems.

"Good Lord!" I groaned. "How are we off for matches? I've none."

Gregory explored his pockets, found a box and counted the contents.

"Three here, *amigo,*" he said, cheerfully.

"But if the eyestones can light this room they can light the corridors. Get all those I left on the ledge, and get another big handful. I'll take the lamp."

With these extraordinary burdens, a dead-lamp made from the skull of a dead man, and a large double handful of the most precious stones the world has ever seen, we set out to resume our search for a path to the open air. We were not to succeed, however. Those amazing gems enabled us to see the pipe-marks we had made as we advanced, but they could not find a way out of the caves for us. There appeared to be no way. Tunnel after tunnel we explored, only to be confronted sooner or later with a dead end of solid rock, and after about half an hour we gave up the attempt.

"No matter," said Gregory. "Try again when we've a fresh ration of oil. We must get back to that cell now, or the animal outside will spot we're missing and raise a howl."

WE MADE our way back towards our prison, now adding a second circle to each pipe-marke to distinguish the return route from the outgoing one—in case we should stray; but there proved to be no need for this precaution. We found the door of our cell only too easily. Then, cautiously rolling aside the great stone, we peered in. The chamber was dark and silent. Gregory deposited the lamp inside, then went back for the stone door-stopper, which he hid under one of our rude benches. We rolled the door to behind us, and stole across to the other one.

Everything looked exactly as it had looked to me about an hour ago; the corridor was still brilliantly illuminated, the dwarf's head still half visible—the fellow hadn't moved an inch. Apparently our evasion by the back door had not been noticed. With anything like luck, the fact that that back door was now unsecured would escape notice also.

Another hour elapsed before there was any fresh development. Then the front door of our cell came ajar, and a supply of food and water was thrust through, together with a cruse of oil for the lamp. We refilled and lit this with one of Gregory's three matches—which we had husbanded; ate and drank, waited till all was quiet again, and commenced our second attempt to discover a way out of the caves. We did not get far with this expedition. To our utter dismay—the back door was now fast.

Gregory returned to the rock bench and sat down without a word. There I sat also, for hour after hour, wrestling with the mystery that surrounded us but finding no vestige of a clew to it. Who was that woman whose body we had stumbled upon in the hall of gems, so strangely beautiful and so amazingly like Marah Starkenden? Could it be that it *was* Marah Starkenden: that we had been right in the first place—that the death-transfiguration had removed even those minute differences, such as the scar under the lip, which led Gregory to believe we had been mistaken? *Was* the woman dead—or merely enshrouded in a death-like sleep; and had she awakened afterwards and followed us, and was it she who had secured the door behind us?

I was still pondering these matters and becoming, it must be confessed, more and more bewildered instead of enlightened, when we heard heavy footsteps outside our cell. They were the steps of shod feet. A moment later there came through the venthole a voice which we recognised as Ducros'.

"Crayton, are you there?" he demanded.

I was about to answer, but Gregory Hope clutched my arm.

"Hope, are you there?" went on Ducros in a louder tone.

"I am here," replied Gregory. We were at the end of the bench nearest the front of the cell, so that we could not have been seen through the venthole.

"You listen, my friend," continued Ducros. "That Estarkenden he say once more he is not common throat-cut and he wish you no harm. And he say now you have time to repent your dam foolishness. Will you swear that oath to be silent?"

"I should never have talked about your past to anybody, Ducros," returned Gregory, "without threats. What you do here is another matter. And as for that cold-blooded scoundrel, if ever I leave these caves alive I shall certainly inform against him. There's another thing, Ducros. The charge will be more than abduction now. Something a lot worse."

"What are you saying, my friend?" demanded Ducros. There was a puzzled note in his words.

Gregory paused, thinking rapidly. "The murder of Miss Marah Starkenden, Ducros," he said at length. "The cowardly murder of a girl, his own niece, who never harmed him or anybody else in the world. I'd give a heap more than I'm worth to see him swing for that!"

Another pause.

Then Ducros said, still in that tone of palpable surprise, "What is this you are meaning, my friend?"

"Ask your brave partner. He'll tell you—if he intends you to know. And you can tell him we've not changed our intentions, and never shall."

"Is that you saying so too, Crayton?"

Gregory nudged me, and I replied in the affirmative. We heard a grunt of disdain, then the heavy shod foot-falls retreating.

GREGORY HOPE took a deep breath. "The cunning brute!" he muttered.

I looked at him inquiringly. "Not Ducros," he said, in answer to the look. "Jacob Starkenden. He doesn't want too many murders on his soul, apparently. He would sooner win us over than kill us."

"Obviously. Else why should he send Ducros here with a fresh offer?"

"Why, indeed, unless he knew something had happened since he made his last one—something that might have been expected to change our minds?"

I began to see what Gregory was driving at. "You think that door was left open on purpose?" I cried.

"Not left open, *amigo*, but opened. That's the really obvious feature in the case, to my way of thinking. Jacob Starkenden wouldn't have had us put in this cell for nothing. What was the reason? Not to let us out of the caves altogether—you can bank on that. What then? He must know there is a way from the back of this cell, through the mine, and into that chamber where the gems are stored.

"Beyond, I think, is a part of the caves where he lives, and I don't fancy the dwarfs are allowed to approach that neighborhood as a rule. In which case our back door would be shut. But it would be quite possible for Jacob Starkenden to double around through his own quarters and draw the stopper. He knew that if he did so, we must discover the door was unsecured and sooner or later find our way into the store-room. That ought to heighten our anxiety to get free—we should be rich men on one stone from that heap, let alone handfuls. And we should see the dead body. We were intended to, and to think it was Marah Starkenden—that she had died since reaching the caves and her death had been purposely hidden from us.

"With Marah dead there would be little point in our remaining here in the hope of saving her. So, thinks Jacob Starkenden, we should make the best of a bad job, swear mum, pocket the loot and clear out. It was a pretty profound move on his part, but he still seems unable to give us credit for much decency."

"You're convinced that woman is *not* Marah Starkenden?"

"Absolutely. You recollect, in Yokohama, when she fainted it was I who stayed in the room with her while you went out to scout for the prowler. I looked at her pretty straight as she lay on the couch—couldn't help it, you know—I'd never seen any other girl to come within miles of her. In fact, I looked a lot harder than I should have had the face to if she'd been conscious, and it was then I spotted the scar. That dead woman has no scar, *amigo*, and she is certainly not Marah Starkenden."

"Then why did you tell Ducros Marah Starkenden had been murdered?"

"Partly because I don't think that fact will make him any more pleased with himself for having thrown in his lot with a mad brute like Jacob Starkenden. I can't get rid of an idea that Ducros is too good a fellow at bottom for that. I didn't try direct persuasion, of course—he'd shy off like a rocket. But I've planted the seed, and it may come up. Then again, it struck me Ducros might know nothing about the dead woman."

"He certainly seemed surprised to hear of it."

"You noticed that? Well, so much the better for us. Ducros is evidently not afraid of Jacob Starkenden. But it may be Jacob Starkenden is afraid of Ducros. He looked none too happy while that gun was drawn on him. And if Ducros gets to think he's being deliberately kept in the dark—ah, well, courage does it, *amigo!*"

Before very long now the door of our cell rolled back, revealing the same array of savages as before, and the same impassable rank of knives. The Ktawrh signed to us to come out. Again we made a slow, shuffling progress through the caves, and some minutes later found ourselves back in the cell from which we had orginally been taken; our only company the pitiable white-bearded old man.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTERY OF THE AGES

WE REMAINED in this cell for about a week. So much we knew from our watches and a time-record we took to scratching on the wall, though

which half of the twenty-four hours was day and which night we had but the very vaguest means of guessing. Our own memory on this point was worthless: we had been drugged and unconscious for a period, and that period might have been twelve hours or twenty-four. Nevertheless we were not altogether without a method of divining what the heavens were like in the outer world.

We noticed that a body of the Ktawrh moved past our cell twice in each span of twenty-four hours—generally about six o'clock. On these occasions the cries they uttered were clearly not ordinary talk but a sort of barbaric chant or incantation; the swing and rhythm of the utterance were quite unmistakable; and we soon gathered that the savages were accustomed to go down to the cave-mouth and offer prayer to the dreaded river at the beginning and end of each day. Which visit marked the dawn and which the sunset we were unable, of course, to be sure, for in this region and at this time of year there would be no great difference in the numerical hour of each.

We also noticed that down the caves, which were normally very silent, there sometimes came a faint but sustained roaring noise. It did not take me long to connect this sound with the white-lit corridor we had passed on our way to the interview with Jacob Starkenden. Now if that corridor contained a fire, the smoke must somehow or other reach the upper air, and would no doubt be visible from a considerable distance by daylight.

Here I was able to draw two fresh conclusions. I remembered that in one of the native stories we had heard about this region there was a reference to a "burning mountain." The smoke of a great fire issuing from the barren cliff-top might well have been mistaken for the smoke of a volcano. And now I realised to the full why Ducros had contrived that we should arrive opposite these caves at night. Had we approached by daylight we might have neared the cave-mouth without suspicion, but we could hardly have failed to be suspicious of the smoke.

Yet one other curious fact I observed about that noise which murmured through the caves. During one half of the day we could never hear it at all, and during the other half our aged companion usually slept. It seemed that in the course of his long imprisonment he had somehow come to recognise that time as night. If so, it would not be hard to explain why the noise ceased during the other half; then, apparently, the fire that caused it was allowed to dwindle, lest its smoke should attract the attention of any stray wanderer from the outer world. These strange half-animal beings of the caves did not welcome attention from the outer world, but preferred to keep their underground city a thing of mystery and vague terror.

The old man of our cell was manifestly overjoyed, in his feeble senile way, to see us back with him. He seemed to infer safety from our presence, and as day followed day without any attempt upon our lives, he brightened visibly; more and more coherent became his talk, and before long we began to hope that the human spirit was at last reviving in that poor wreck of a brain.

Gregory handled him with great patience and a degree of skill that surprised me beyond all bounds—he might almost have been an experienced physician treating mental cases in an asylum, so unfailing were his tact and kindliness in coaxing the old fellow back to sanity. Gregory had his reward, too. By the end of four days we had gathered much from our fellow captive, piecemeal scraps of information, it is true, but never contradictory. Of the man himself, who he was and where he came from, we could learn nothing; his memory of what had been in the world of men seemed irreparably wiped out.

There were other indications besides the words he spoke, however. We knew from the way he spoke them that he had been no ordinary traveller or wealth-seeker, but a man of learning and culture very pronouncedly above the common run. His speech took on more and more the tones of a scholar; it became increasingly evident that at the time when death closed in upon him in these awful caves the man had been engaged upon some expedition of scientific import.

I think it was about seven o'clock in the evening, or what we judged to be evening, of the seventh day after our return to this cell. Gregory was trying the old man as he had tried him a dozen times before on the subject of his name and standing, but the answer came as hopelessly as ever.

"I do not know who I am. I have forgotten." A pause, then: "All who drink the Wine of Oblivion forget what they were before."

Gregory Hope and I exchanged a swift glance. We were nearing the truth. The

old man had not used this expression previously, yet it was clear he must have taken it from the same native words as Jacob Starkenden translated into "Wine of Forgetting."

"Do you not even remember when you drank the Wine of Oblivion?" continued Gregory.

"I do not remember. I should not have known I had drunk it if the small hairy men had not told me. They said they had told me before, but I did not understand. I must have been long learning their tongue, for it was seldom they spoke to me."

"Do you remember the time when you first found yourself in these caves?"

"I remember waking here once. But there are long periods after it of which I remember nothing."

"Was there no mark on your clothing by which you could learn who you were?"

"There was no mark. I was clothed like this." The old man feebly shook his rags with one skinny hand.

"Have you ever tried to escape?"

"At the beginning of the period I remember. Many times, for I wished to die. But the small hairy men only led me back. Once I reached a place where there were openings and a light beyond, not like the light of this—" He broke off, pointing to our one skull-lamp. "Have you seen those openings?"

"We have never seen them. We were carried through them in the dark, and with bags over our heads. We had been seized by the small hairy men. What you saw out there was the light of the sun—the daylight. Do you not remember?"

FOR a moment or two, horrible and well nigh incredible as it seemed to us, the old man clearly *did not remember.* Then, however, a flicker of understanding dawned in his blank face. "That is what it is like outside these places," he said, "is it not? A different light?"

"In daytime, yes, and at night there is the light of the moon, if the sky is not clouded."

"There are men outside these places?"

"Many men and women. Far away from here, though. Down country there are natives, men with brown skins; but it is many hundreds of miles away that there are any white men like you and me and Crayton. This part of the world where we are now seems to be uninhabited except for the small hairy men of these caves. They are different from the half-civilized natives down country—mere savages, you know."

"Savages? They are more than that. They are pure aboriginal stock."

The words came out so abruptly, in a tone so much firmer and more decisive, that the pair of us stared at him in utter astonishment. His features, also, had taken on a look of sudden comprehension, immeasurably brighter than we had ever seen them before; it was as if his true intelligence had for a moment burst through the deadly veil that enshrouded it, like a blaze of sunlight through thick black fog. Then, at that self-same moment, the old man sank back against the cell wall and fell into one of his almost instantaneous sleeps. We strove to wake him, and after a time half succeeded, but although he opened his eyes the momentary flash of intelligence had gone clean out of them.

It was now our fellow captive's customary time for sleep, at any rate, and fearing it might ruin what progress we had made if we jolted him out of his pathetic routine of existence, we decided to let him alone for the present and begin again when he awoke of his own accord. It might be not only unwise but unnecessary to hurry him. That last incident had encouraged us greatly; there seemed at least a chance that before long he would finally recover his own mind and vouchsafe us knowledge which might suggest a way of escape for all three of us. But the next piece of enlightenment we got from him was not of that nature. It was less useful, practically—and infinitely more amazing.

About three hours after the old man had fallen asleep we were making ready to sleep ourselves. The experience of the last few days had taught us that it was hopeless for us to try to kill time by sleeping as long as our fellow captive slept. We found he was apt to remain more or less unconscious for eleven or twelve hours out of the twenty-four, but we were not so fortunate; we had not yet shaken down to this living death.

Nor had we yet acquired the power of sleeping at will on a bare rock floor. He had. There was no flesh on the arms of that pitiable wreck, but we noticed hideous lumps of hardened skin on both his elbows, and on other parts of his shrunken frame there were similar callousities. These disfigurements were unpleasant to behold, and ghastly to reflect upon—when one remembered how they must have been acquired; but enabled him at least to rise superior to the total absence of bed or

bedding in that cell, and to forget his miseries in sleep while we could do no more than lie feverishly awake.

Gregory Hope and I had whispered together long and earnestly that night. The question uppermost with us was whether to submit to this hellish confinement any longer or to hurl ourselves at the door the first time it was opened and make a fight. The latter course, we realised, would mean practically certain death, but it would at least be preferable to years of captivity that could end only in death also. We were fast abandoning hope of being able to help Esau Starkenden or his daughter. On the other hand we might, by a miracle, burst through our gaolers to the open air, find fragments of rock to break our fetters, and escape across the stream—into which it might be the Ktawrh would be hindered by superstitious dread from following us.

I think we should actually have decided upon the attempt but for one fact. And that was a surprising fact indeed. Once or twice during the past few days we had heard the sound of shod feet outside our cell. We never saw who was there, but we could only conclude that, for some reason unknown to us now, Jacob Starkenden and Ducros had not yet left the caves. And so long as they remained, there was one chance in a thousand that Jacob Starkenden would relent of his fiendish purpose—or that Ducros would intervene.

Gregory and I had got thus far in our deliberations when suddenly we became conscious that the old man was muttering.

"THERE lived the race of Khmer, great, populous, powerful. The culture of Greece, the might of Assyris, the imperial splendour of Egypt—all were theirs. Where is now the race of Khmer? Says the savant—dead. Says another—transformed and degraded, yet surviving. Surviving? In the uncouth Chong and mongrel Charay of the country called Annam? In the prouder, higher, yet nevertheless greatly debased dwellers in Angkor-Thom? The tall lake people who cling to the ancient territory of Khmer, far south? So much for the latter end. And the beginning of the race? Says the historian—an immigration in ages long past, from far Central Asian plateaux. From Central Asia came they, those cultured and comely ones, liker to the fair skinned Caucasians of distant Europe than to any mongoloid stock. .

"And the ancient religion of Khmer—the gods who reigned before Buddha the Awakened, before Brahma the Offerer of Prayer? Extinct? Wholly? Strange to have been the last survivor, to muse upon all the immemorial greatness that was, the decay and death that drew nigh. . .

"I see him, Undying One, last of the true faith, priest it may be, magician perhaps, prophet of the disaster to come. Around him take root and flourish the hated heresies from across the ocean; his warnings are heeded not. I see him flee the polluted sanctuaries—he departs secretly by night. And travels alone? I see differ-

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ently. There is another, a woman, girl-priestess of the ancient line. They journey far northward, to the uttermost limits of the empire of Khmer, to a secret shrine in a desert land; and entering, they sleep before a forgotten altar, looked upon only by images of the ancient gods.

"Very wise is the magician, the Undying One, wise and skilled in mystic drugs. His years are prolonged beyond the span of man's years. But she—she is mortal, and must die? Take, he says, and eat. She has eaten the Bread of Immortality, that arrests decay yet shall never give back youth. He too. They live on. She ages not, but is young and beautiful as when she ate the Bread. He dies not, but is already immeasurably old. .

"The years roll past. Far southward, Khmer rises to its zenith, the false Indian gods thrive, centuries elapse before the prophecies of the Undying One are fulfilled. Yet are they fulfilled in the end. After greatness comes decay. War and tumult oppress the earth. How is the fair city changed! Savages have swept in and broken the pillars, they have defiled the sculptured friezes and magnificent entablatures, and there is no strong hand to stay them. The warriors are slain, the flaccid, vice-ridden courtiers have fled. It is the beginning of destruction. Down to swift ruin crashes the mighty race of Khmer, and the glory of Angkor-Wat is but a heap of stones and a memory.

"But here in the caves? Peace and oblivion for many cycles of years. Then changes also, but of another order. Savages, small primitive men, junglefolk. Wild races surrounding them have advanced farther towards civilisation than they—hold stronger bows and sharper spears and are more skilled in killing. For such is the meaning of civilisation. The junglefolk are driven out of their fertile jungle, they flee to the barren ranges, they find the caves. The Undying One and his priestess are to them strange magicians whom they fear and serve. These small jungle-folk, then, shall be guardians of the ancient shrine.

"Yet is their veneration impure. Naught know they of the ancient faith of Khmer, but follow after dark cults of junglefolk in the day-break of human time. They have craftily defiled the images, turning the noble to the bestial, the lofty to the base. And they have imported their murderous god. But what matter, if the inner sanctuary be inviolate? To that sanctuary they do not penetrate, for they stand in awe of the Undying One. *Yet have I penetrated to the secret innermost recesses. . . .*

"I have seen the Undying One and his priestess. And she—she is that Unaging One who at the beginning fled north with him from the dishonored shrines of Khmer? Strange, for her beauty is not wholly the beauty of the race of Khmer, which is revealed in undefiled carvings of the innermost sanctuary. Hers is the beauty of that Unknown God who came many centuries past, whose image was graven by the Undying One himself—*the Unknown God of white skin and fair hair and golden beard, who afterwards departed and was seen no more.* ."

We listened enthralled to this astounding recital, so circumstantial, so logically coherent, so incredibly unlike the quavering utterances of the old man up to that time that we could scarcely believe we were listening to the same person. The man's magnificent intellect, then, had not been destroyed by the mysterious drugs he had eaten. Through years of captivity, deep down beneath the cloud that obscured it, his brain had been active, recording, remembering, speculating, reasoning; now at last the subconscious mind was uppermost, speaking through the lips.

And then, just as we seemed on the very point of unravelling this most amazing mystery of the caves, the old man broke off. Carried away by an ungovernable curiosity I moved slightly nearer to him. It was a fatal blunder. In some subtle way he must have taken cognizance, and the chain of thought was deflected into another channel—one which might have profoundly interested any scholar able to meet our fellow captive on his own plane, but was a maddening digression to us at the moment.

Yet he continued to speak in a tone if anything firmer and more assured than before; his shrunken form literally bodied out under the influence of that vigorous mind, and there could be little doubt that the sleeping man imagined himself to be lecturing—as if to a classroom of students.

"Now, gentlemen," he went on, "let us settle for ourselves the problem of where the ape-men originated. Let us first examine this region of the earth and the races found here to-day. Northward is the border of the Chinese dominions, and there dwell many peoples of pronounced pre-Chinese stamp. The Pangs and Laos, the races of Mang, Mo and Shi, have all at least a strain of aboriginal blood running in their veins. To the west we find

Shans, Kachins and the wilder peoples of northern Burma; southward are Siamese, Cambodian and Malay-Mongoloid stock, eastward the coastal races—Annamite, Tongkinese and Negrito. All these, as I say, betray features of the surviving aboriginal of these areas, but among them all there seems none so promising to our investigation as the race of Shan.

"THE Shan, primitive but for the most part unwarlike cultivators, are rich in ancient tradition, and there occurs particularly to my mind the Shan theory of their origin as a race. They are descended, the Shan hold from that supreme god of the jungle, the Great White Tiger. Here we have the cult of the White Tiger actually surviving, and may therefore assume a strong probability that the present-day peaceful Shan and the savages of the caves, unlike as they are now, had in remote ages a common origin.

"You no doubt know that as an indicator of race, religion is often truer than either language or physical characteristics, for while a religion may persist in one form for thousands of years, human language may become modified beyond recognition in a few hundred, and even physical characteristics respond swiftly to any sharp change of habit or habitat.

"One more point. Among the Shan of today it is universally believed that the earthquakes which visit their country from time to time are caused by the movements of little people who live under the earth. Let me ask you, gentlemen, to make a note of that most pregnant belief. It is customary, in explaining such, to beg the question by ascribing them to mere haphazard and superstitious guessing. That they seldom are; far oftener have they some definite arguable foundation. How, then, are we to account for the belief under discussion? Are we not entitled to attribute it to some legend regarding the migrant primitive Shan who disappeared into these caves in bygone centuries? Let us, at any rate, work on that hypothesis until a more probable one occurs to us.

"We have, then, the two races, widely dissimilar in present habitat and physical characteristics, yet preserving right down to this day points of similarity which seem to more than hint a common origin. It is the old story of man and the gigantic gorilla of Central African forests.

Inconceivably as the two differ in this twentieth century of our era, we are agreed that their descent is from a single ancestry, and that the enormous gap between them today is due to the fact that whereas the one has been content to remain Troglodytes Gorilla of the jungle, the other, the more enterprising, has wandered to other regions of the earth, multiplied, evolved, acted and reacted upon himself until he is now able without presumption to call himself Intelligent Man, and his unprogressive cousin the brute beast. Here, on an infinitely smaller scale, we find a similar phenomenon. The brutish dwarfs of the caves the brutish . . the. . . ."

The words tailed off into mumbling fainter and fainter, then silence, while the old man slept.

For some moments I could do more than stare at him, and ask myself what inconceivable irony of fate ever allowed an intellect like his to be buried in these ghastly caves.

I exclaimed at length, turning to Gregory Hope, "And we've been trying to bring his memory back! Far better to let it stay blank!"

Gregory did not appear to hear. His brows were knitted, it was several minutes before the shadow of downright bewilderment cleared from his face.

"I begin to see daylight," he whispered. "Jacob Starkenden mentioned certain facts—facts so strange that he didn't think we should be able to believe them. I've a pretty shrewd idea now what those facts are. As for believing them, there doesn't seem to be much choice."

"What do you mean, Gregory?"

"The priestess, *amigo*—the woman this old fellow calls the Unaging One. He couldn't have dreamed that."

"You think—"

"I'm tolerably certain. The Unaging One is dead, and we saw her body a few days ago. Did you notice, by the way, a queer perfume that hung about it?"

"I did, certainly."

"And had you ever struck a perfume like that before?"

"Never in my life, that I remember."

"Neither had I. And did you ever see a dead body look like it? The woman might have died that minute—no, she might have been alive while we looked at her, so far as appearance went. I imagine that body has been embalmed in a fashion the world knows nothing of—a fashion that will preserve it from decay for many years yet, perhaps forever. So we don't know how long ago the woman died. It may have been ages, it may have been a few weeks—

just before Jacob Starkenden was released from these caves, in fact."

Now I too began to see daylight. "You suppose he went to bring a new priestess?" I gasped.

"I think he went to bring the new priestess. And a lot of other things are coming out clearer now. Jacob Starkenden was not treated like an ordinary victim when he reached the caves, remember. We've seen for ourselves that the reigning priestess was curiously like him in the face. She suddenly and unaccountably dies—even the drugs of the Undying One cannot save her. But there must be a priestess in these caves. If not, how could that ceremony be carried out—the ceremony Jacob Starkenden spoke of—the presentation before sacrifice?

"Meantime, I think, the savages have been kept in the dark. But unless a new priestess is secured, they must find out sooner or later, and then their belief in the Undying One is going to get a severe jolt. Jacob Starkenden knows of the one woman in the world who may resemble the Unaging One closely enough to pass muster. He has not seen her for sixteen years, but even a young girl foretells clearly enough as a rule which member of the family she will be like when she grows up. Jacob Starkenden takes a gamble on it."

"A pretty bold gamble, Gregory, I should say. He couldn't have known whether she was still alive, even."

"Admitted. But to my mind the most amazing thing about it is this. For all Jacob Starkenden knew when he left these caves, he would have to fetch her from Europe. The fact she was already in the Far East must have been an unexpected stroke of luck—unless the Undying One has unusual means of knowing things. I'd hesitate to deny even that now.

"Otherwise, what guarantee could he have had that Jacob Starkenden would ever come back at all? He must have some hold on him that we don't yet understand. At all events, Jacob Starkenden makes a bid for freedom, offering a new priestess to take the place of the dead one. The Undying One trusts Jacob Starkenden, and supplies him with the wherewithal to carry out his scheme. That might have failed—so far it seems to have come off."

"But if the Undying One dare not let the savages know the real priestess is dead, would Jacob Starkenden have risked leaving a road open to the place where she lies?"

"No risk at all. He said quite a bit to them in their ghastly lingo. It seems he told them to put us in that cell, but he may have also told them not to enter it themselves—we don't know. Then again, he knew that if we got out we should hardly be such idiots as to leave the back door open behind us. Even if the dwarfs broke through, and struck into the right tunnel—and we had a great job to find it ourselves, remember—and saw the dead body, it would be easy enough to tell them that was the strange woman brought here recently. And the supposed real priestess could always be produced to prove it!"

I REMAINED silent for a long while. The sheer devilish ingenuity of the plot staggered me, and I shuddered to think of our helplessness against the sinister being who, apparently, had conceived it, and the human agent who had carried it out. But one point remained a mystery to me yet—by what incredible coincidence did Jacob Starkenden and his niece resemble the reigning priestess of the caves?

"Crayton," said Gregory Hope to me gravely, when I put the matter to him, "I hadn't much in the way of credulity about me when I came to this hell-hole. I had a strong dash of the sceptic. I've lost that now. I shall never ask any man to believe the things we've run up against here, but whether I believe them myself is another story. That fair-skinned 'unknown god' that appeared here many centuries ago—whose image was carved by the Undying One—who departed and was seen no more. Well, we've only heard of one fair-skinned man who was supposed to have visited this side of the world many centuries ago. He took an eyestone back to Europe—what if he got that eyestone in these caves? It may have been before the coming of the dwarfs. And who knows what drama of love and broken vows may have taken place in the empty caves? We shall certainly never know—yet I cannot help speculating. And as I tell you, I've lost my faculty of unbelief. Suppose a child was born, a girl child, after the "unknown god" had departed. Suppose the original priestess died, but the child lived on, and ate the Bread of Immortality, and kept her beauty right down through the ages?"

The weird fascination of the mystery held us in its grip for hours, forgetful even of the fate that awaited us, of the gleaming red eye that stared through the venthole of our cell with maddening fixity,

of the occasional stump and patter of bare feet on the rock floor without, spasmodic, furtive, horribly insect-like.

Followed an uneventful spell of about four days and a half, which time we occupied mainly in striving to get our fellow captive back into his right mind—there had been no recurrence of that sudden lucidity he had shown in sleep—and in endeavoring to keep up our own spirits. For we needed heartening, by now, needed it badly. We had no mirror in the cell, but I saw a haggard, wild look creep day by day into Gregory's face, and I knew that my own must be wearing the same tell-tale symptoms; the deadly monotony of this imprisonment, more terrible by far than any immediate danger, was beginning to sap our resolve. Worse still, one awful period came when I was within an ace of committing a crime which would have blackened the remainder of my life. I could hardly believe afterwards that it had happened, yet happen it did: a hellish, seductive voice whispered in my ear, and the words it said were these:

You cannot help Marah Starkenden, and what is she, what has she ever been to you? Why stay here, immured perhaps for years, with nothing but a ghastly death at the end of it all—why not capitulate?

Hope need never know. He is asleep. So is the old man. Summon Jacob Starkenden. He will release you—on one easy condition. You will be out in the open air, seeing daylight again, carrying measureless wealth in your pockets, before these two wake. Hope will merely think you have been removed to another cell. He will go to his death, in time, without even suspecting. . . .

It was irresistible. I veritably believe I was on the point of springing up and putting the treachery into effect—when something happened to save me. Gregory Hope spoke. He looked at me, first casually, then more fixedly; for one dreadful moment that seemed a minute I thought he had divined from the look in my eyes the dastardly purpose which had been taking shape behind them. And his words lent colour to the idea.

"Hullo," he cried, "what's up?"

"Nothing, old man," I said, in a voice I should barely have known for mine.

"Eh? Can't you hear that row?"

It is proof enough of the way temptation had gripped and absorbed me, that I had not heard. But now that Gregory called my attention to it I distinctly caught a new sound in the caves. It must have been that self-same sound that had awakened him, as an unwonted variation from norm often will rouse a man from deep sleep.

The noise was something like that faint, distant roaring I have already mentioned, yet with a difference—it sounded on a higher, crisper note; and as hour after hour went by, we noticed another distinctive feature about this new noise. It continued steadily for more than half a day. Then occurred the incident which gave us a hint of its origin.

I may say that we had got into the habit of leaving near the door of the cell that one food-platter and one water-pitcher allotted to the three of us, so that the savages might replenish them when they brought fresh supplies; and that we obtained oil for our one grim lamp in the same way as we obtained food. I had crawled to the door to fetch a meal that had just been thrust in, and was returning to the others with it, when I noticed a patch of moisture on the smooth rock floor. I took no great account of this at the moment, for I imagined I must have spilled a little water from the pitcher. About half an hour later, however, as Gregory Hope was carrying back the empty utensils, I saw him suddenly lay the things down, clap his hand to his head, and stare upwards. He then looked at the floor of the cell again.

"Odd!" he muttered. "I never noticed a drip before."

We were both at that moist spot now, staring from it to the roof.

"And I never noticed a crack before," I said, "but there is one. I believe they're common in limestone caves. That's how the stalactite—"

Gregory sprang up, reached our lamp and laid it beside the moist patch. I now observed that part of the floor bore marks of scraping and scratching, as if an incrustation had been removed from it.

AT THIS juncture we heard a sudden stir in the corner of the cell. Our unknown companion had evidently been watching and listening.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" queried Gregory, in the kindly tone he always adopted when speaking to our patient.

"It is thirteen—fourteen—fifteen times I have known the drip to come," he cried. "Then there were sounds of roaring like the sound I hear now—and men screamed in the caves."

I looked at Gregory, and Gregory looked

at me. His face—what I could see of it above the thick stubby beard he now wore—was a good deal whiter than the wall of our cell; and I have no doubt my own face presented a like pallor. We knew now the meaning of that wet patch on the floor. Rain had broken on the outer world, had been falling for days, had percolated at last down through that enormous cliff and re-started the dried-up drip from over our heads. And the river had flooded—that was the high-pitched, continuous roaring that reached us.

For several hours now there was a steadily rising hum of activity and excitement in the caves without, punctuated by occasional harsh, barking cries. Then came, from not very far off, the unmistakable grumble of a cell door being rolled back. We heard sudden sounds of scuffling, a clinking of fetters, and a shriek, loud and long-drawn, that dwindled away into the distance.

Our aged companion began to speak in horrible measured gasps.

"It is the presentation!" he said. "The victim will be—taken to the chamber—of the Undying One. There the sacrifice—is consecrated. Afterwards—we shall—hear!"

"What is the sacrifice?" demanded Gregory, his voice parched and cracked.

"Sacrifice—to the—Great White Tiger."

The ghastly prediction was not long waiting its fulfilment. We heard, now very faint and far away, long screeching cries that haunt me yet, and will continue to haunt me, I am afraid, so long as I live. It was impossible, from the sound, to judge how far off those cries were, yet I could make a guess. I surmised that they arose at the mouth of a white-lit corridor we had seen many days ago. And I had no need to ask myself now what lay at the other end of the passage.

A hideously suggestive interval ensued. Then came thundering down the caves a wild, unholy chant which drowned for a while the ceaseless roar of the river; nearer and nearer it sounded, and at last drew opposite the very door of our cell. Gregory Hope sprang up and peered through the venthole, but he did not remain there long. He turned away, burying his face in his hands as if to shut out the recollection of what he had seen.

"What is it, Gregory?" I cried, peering out for myself. But the procession had now passed.

"Something red-hot," he muttered.

I shot an inquiring glance at the old man, who had struggled to his feet. All his lethargy had now left him; he was vividly remembering the horrors of past years.

"When White Tiger disgorges," he gasped, "they throw ashes—to propitiate the river god."

I remained at the venthole; and before long saw the return of that procession. A large body of the dwarfs marched by, chanting wildly as before, and though I could not, for the crowd, distinguish clearly what they were carrying, it seemed to me to be a sort of cauldron carried on rods—apparently of iron. I do not think the object was red-hot now. Perhaps it had been dipped in the flood waters of the river.

There elapsed about two hours of comparative calm. That frightful ceremony was then repeated, and twice again, after similar intervals.

Gregory Hope turned to me, reaching out his manacled hands. "This looks like the end, Crayton," he said quietly. "Those poor devils were natives—no doubt Jacob Starkenden's bearers. It may be our turn any moment now. We must make a fight for it. Take my jack-knife. I'll do the best I can with my hands."

I refused the weapon, but shook Gregory's hand in silence. We sat waiting.

There was a longer pause now, a much longer one, and we were beginning to hope the ghastly tale of sacrifice was complete. But we had hoped too soon. Once more we heard sounds of struggling and hoarse yells. This time there was a difference, however. The first cries arose from farther off, and did not die away as before; on the contrary, they increased in volume, and I thought I distinguished among them a great shout uttered in a European voice. It was followed almost instantaneously by a thunderous report, as if the very cliff had been split asunder.

Then all became confusion. I strained my ears, but by this time my own heart was pounding so violently that I could gather nothing intelligible. Somebody had fired a rifle—who? Was help at hand for us?

Outside in the caves that tremendous commotion continued, drew near, reached the very chamber in which our cell lay. Then, before I could see through the venthole what was happening, our door suddenly rolled open. I sprang back. At the same instant a body was heaved through the aperture, the body of a man rudely

shackled as we were, unconscious, the back of his head dripping blood. It was Ducros.

CHAPTER X

CRISIS

I SAW no more than a glimpse of evil faces and serried long knives; then the door was rolled into position with a crash.

Gregory and I knelt over Ducros' huge form—which left little room in our cell—and examined him. The giant was not dead, though for all we knew he might be dying; the blow he had received on the back of his head must have been terrific. We tore strips from our shirts, bandaged the great ragged gash with them, and moistened his brow and lips with a few drops of drinking water that fortunately remained to us—we could do no more.

For fully an hour Ducros remained unconscious. Finally he opened his eyes, struggled into a sitting posture, and stared round the cell; and of all the astonishing things I ever saw about Ducros, I think nothing astonished me more than the cool and perfectly matter-of-fact way he took this disastrous reversal of fortune when at last he had recovered enough of his senses to realize it.

"So!" he growled, seeing us. "You Hope and Crayton, this is what you call turn table with vengeance, by dam! Here I am prisoner in same boat as you. And who is that very old fellow, *hein?*"

"We don't know—he doesn't remember his own name. But what happened outside?"

"It is very queer thing which happen, I can tell you," replied Ducros with naïve deliberation, "for I am not accustom to be defeat by dam dwarf. I see that I have been fool to be here so long, also."

"Why did you stay?"

"It is that Estarkenden asking me. Many days ago I say to him, 'Come, my friend, we have finish our work here and it is time to go down country.' But he say Undying One not yet permit him. That very old priest only keep him till rains have fallen and he has try new arrangement for sacrifice in these cave to see if he work. Rain must fall very soon, that Estarkenden say, and we only wait few days at outside, and then we can go in peace. And I am such dam-fool to agree.

"Now today I look for Simbok and I do not see him. I ask that Estarkenden where is Simbok but he say he does not know. I think Simbok has gone looking for place where he can pull those eyestone out of wall and those dam savage not see him, and I say no more about him then. But when those savage make sacrifice I am suspicious, my friends. Then I find what they have done. They put chain on Simbok, and they stop his mouth with gag, and they send him in prison. And I see him carry out to throw to that dam White Tiger.

"Simbok he has broken his gag and he call to me for help. I say to that Estarkenden, 'What is meaning of this my friend, have you lie to me?' He reply, 'What is one native more or less? Those savage must have sacrifice, and they do not sacrifice white man yet, for he is to be kept for very last chance.' So Simbok must go to White Tiger. I say, 'That is not to be, my friend, for Simbok is good native and serve me well, and he serves you well also. You tell those savage to let Simbok go pretty quick, by dam!' That Estarkenden he say he cannot, for dwarf are mad-terrify with river rising up, and they will not release him. I say, 'Then I give them *something more to be mad-terrify with!*'

"I drive them away from Simbok, and I knock off his iron with butt of my rifle. These dam savage rush for him again. I aim and I shoot, and I think that bullet is going through three dam savage. But they come once more very swiftly. I club many with that rifle, and if it is only those dwarf to fight I am not prisoner now. But there is blow coming from behind, and it is that Estarkenden who strike with rifle over heads of those dwarf. And I tell you, my friends, it is to be bad time for that dam Estarkenden when I meet him!"

"What happened to Simbok?"

"I have not seen. But Simbok is unarm, and I think those dwarf get him and throw to White Tiger."

"Where is Esau Starkenden?"

"He is in one prison by himself, but where I do not know. I do not concern myself for that Estarkenden—he has been dam low scoundrel. But that other Estarkenden, he is dam lowest scoundrel of two. I do many thing for him, and he is traitor when it is coming to pinch." Ducros' voice rose a little here, and he shook his manacled hands in an ominous manner. "I think I pass out soon now, my friends," he went on coolly. "I think we all pass out same way, but I tell you this—I do not pass out before I kill that Jacob Starkenden!"

"You're with us now, Ducros?" cried Gregory.

"I think that yes, by dam! If we fight one by one it is sure thing we go out *pouff!* —like candle. It is perhaps not much better fighting together, but that is only way left."

DUCROS crawled across to the venthole, through which, thanks to his great stature, he could see while still on his knees. There he remained for some minutes. The chanting in the caves outside had now become practically continuous, yet now and again, in the brief intervals, I thought I caught another sound —a heavy breathing and grunting, as of men labouring under a load.

Ducros at length squatted down and faced us with a business-like air. "Now you listen, you fellow," he said. "I am old campaigner, and I make myself commandant for three of us. You are agreeing that, *hein?*"

We nodded. "So!" he continued. "I make plan of campaign. Those dam savage go by this prison carrying it look to me like many large rock. That mean those sacrifice are no good and river he still rise, so they try stopping hole at beginning of these cave. But that is perhaps no good also and they try sacrifice once more. There is left now only you and me and this very old fellow and that Esau Estarkenden.

"But I think his dear brother not sacrifice him this time if he can help, for he like him first to have some taste of living death. So it leave only us. Now I tell you, my friends, we do not go to that dam White Tiger, which is not good death for white man. So we do not leave this prison one by one. If those dam savage try for that, I say we are to fight here, and if we are to die, we die on knife or be shot—for I think perhaps that Jacob Estarkenden give rifle to savage and show him how to shoot. That is only one time dying, and he is soon finish. So! But I do not know why those savage are putting us in one prison. Is it because they would take us to sacrifice all together? Then that is good fortune for us, my friends, and we do not fight here. We wait. It is necessary we go to that dam very old priest call Undying One.

"He live far inside these cave, and there is place for us to fight. I tell you why. Those dwarf stop this end of cave, but I think they are not such dam-fool to shut themself in. There must be other way to open air. And I think that way is near other end of cave, and if we fight there, we are nearer to escaping out, *hein?*"

We nodded again. "So!" Ducros went on. "We come to that inside place, and you watch me till I give signal. Then we fight, and if we should be glad of seeing daylight again, we fight hard, by dam! This is my way to fight. First we fall to ground and kick hard with the feet. There is that way not so much fear to be shot, and those knife not cut the boot as he cut the hand. I tell you I knock over some dam savage pretty quick, and I get three knife for us. These iron—"

Ducros paused, scanning his shackles rather disdainfully. He gave a tentative pull at them, then retired to a corner of the cell.

"You listen, my friends!" he whispered. "Those dam savage think I not break these iron. I tell you it is perhaps not so! You please now cry out as if you are much terrify—you are ready?"

Gregory and I promptly set up a loud wail of simulated terror—though for my part there was no great need of simulation. A horrible gleaming animal eye stared through the venthole. Kneeling in the middle of the cell we waved our manacled hands in a gesture of entreaty; the eye at once vanished, however, and did not appear again. When next we looked at Ducros he was scrutinising his enormous wrists, which were bloody but free. His foot-irons he had also burst. He now beckoned us to join him in the corner.

"I break yours for you, my friends," he whispered. "Then I put together, and you will be careful not pulling too much till that time come to fight, so these dam savage think iron still hold. They see this blood, but it cannot be help—and perhaps they see much more before we are finishing! Give me your hand and foot, Crayton. You are ready for crying aloud once more?"

I held out my wrists to Ducros, who took the two stout iron rings in his hands. Again we raised a piteous yell. I felt Ducros' gigantic frame quiver like some piece of powerful machinery suddenly set in action; my hands flew wide asunder, and at the next instant my feet. In either case the central link of the chain had been torn open!

"Your hand and foot quickly, Hope, my friend," muttered Ducros. "They come any time and see, by dam!"

A moment later Gregory's shackles had likewise been broken, by an effort that

would have amazed me had I not been already aware of Ducros' inhuman strength. I will say this much on the point, however: I do not believe any three ordinary men could have burst those fetters with their bare hands. The way Ducros forced the links back into position was more astonishing still—as Gregory and I saw to our cost when we came to perform a like service for him. We set our fingers bleeding over the task, and even at that it was a far less neat and innocent-seeming job than Ducros had made of our shackles. I then pulled upon my own with a fair vigour. The broken links gaped, and I knew that when the time came I should be able to burst them for good.

"So!" cried Ducros at last. "Now for next thing. If those dam dwarf come for us, we go all three together or we do not go at all."

"All four together, I think," put in Gregory, with a glance towards the far corner of the cell. The old man sat staring fixedly at the venthole; for some time past he had seemed to be scarce conscious of our presence.

"What are you meaning, Hope?" demanded Ducros. "That old fellow he is no use to fight, and he is not much use escaping also. We leave him here, I think!"

"I don't!" retorted Gregory hotly. "If we escape he will be the only victim left. He's far too good a man to be murdered by these filthy savages. And I may not have any other opportunity of helping him."

The incredulity in Ducros' face gave place to anger. "You listen, you Hope," he muttered through his black beard. "I tell you it is forlorn chance anyway, getting out of these cave. Do you think I am such dam-fool to carry this old fellow too, *hein*?"

"He won't need to be carried for the first part of the show, at any rate. He can walk. When it comes to fighting, I shall do my best for him as well as myself. But I don't propose to leave this cell without him."

Ducros continued to stare at Gregory for several moments.

"You are English, my friend," he said at last, slowly, "and you are dam fool. You would risk whole expedition for old fellow who is perhaps to die that same minute we get him out of these cave. If we try helping him, we die like rat in trap, I tell you, and we do not help him after all."

GREGORY hesitated, then gave a sudden start forward. "But he can very likely help us," he cried. "How do you suppose we're going to make sure we all leave this cell together?"

"How so? We wait for that door opening. Those dam dwarf make sign to come out. We sit still. They come in for us. We pretend much terrify, but if we see they take all, we go with them. If one alone, we make the fight here to an end. That is only thing I see, my friend. You have better plan, *hein?*"

"Much better. If we're going to be carried out by the dwarfs, they can only carry one of us through that door at a time. What's to prevent them shutting the door as soon as they've got that one outside—even if they leave two or three of their own crowd in here? The only thing we can do is to bargain with them. This old man knows their speech. Through him we can tell them we're willing to go to the sacrifice together, but not singly, and that if they want one of us only, they can come and fetch him."

"So!" grunted Ducros. "You are not such dam-fool as I think, Hope, but those dwarf are not dam-fool also. If we do that thing you are proposing, it may be they suspect reason of it. Then there is an end coming very soon, by dam!"

Finally we resolved upon the following scheme. When the Ktawrh came for us, we would first parley with them as Gregory Hope suggested. If they agreed, we would crawl out of the door two by two, Ducros and myself leading, Gregory following behind with the old man too closely for the door to be shut between each couple. If the dwarfs sent any of their number in after us, we would take that for proof enough they had guessed our true motive; we would burst our bonds and trust Ducros to bowl over the emissaries quickly, so that we could secure their knives and either make a sally or hold the doorway of this cell, whichever Ducros should then order. Gregory handed his jack-knife to the giant as being the likeliest to put it to good use, and we carefully explained to the old man what would be required of him.

It will be seen, however, that when the time came there was actually no need to carry out this plan. And not one of us could have dreamed what would be the ultimate result of Gregory's determination to take the old man with us.

For several hours now we sat waiting the issue. while the sounds of tumult out-

side our cell grew louder and louder; evidently the dwarfs were not only in a frenzy of excitement, but terrified to the pitch of madness. Wild cries went up from them incessantly, and whenever we looked through the venthole we caught glimpses of them hurrying past with more and more stone towards the mouth of the caves. So far as we could gather from our aged companion the savages had never done this before; it seemed to us the idea must have originated with Jacob Starkenden.. What could be the meaning of it? Did he wish to ensure the caves against flooding, so that he could prevail upon the dwarfs to make no more sacrifices?

Had there penetrated into his insane mind a belated gleam of compunction? Or was he merely anxious that his brother should endure the torments of captivity for another year, or even years, before going to his death? And why had the Undying One, who from all accounts was gifted with superhuman intelligence, never commanded the dwarfs to adopt the simple and obvious expedient of walling up the cliff face? I could propose only one answer to that point. The region of the caves given over to his own sacred shrine and mysteries must be perhaps one independent of any threat of flooding.

It might be, also, that there was something in the dark superstition of these dwarfs with which even the Undying One had not ventured to tamper; that although they had apparently been induced to try practical methods, they believed at bottom that the prophesied disaster to their race could be averted by sacrifice alone. Before long we had a plain hint to that effect.

Fresh cries arose in the caves—screams and shrieks such as we had now come to recognize as the prelude to sacrifice. The victim was not Esau Starkenden; of that we could be certain, for the cries were undoubtedly the utterance of a native.. Could it be that one of the bearers brought here by Jacob Starkenden had up to the present been overlooked? Or had Ducros' lieutenant merely gained this short respite by the diversion Ducros had created in his favour? The giant seemed to think so.

"That is Simbok going to White Tiger, my friends," he said grimly. "It is great pit. Simbok has been good native in this world, and there is not six common native in Asia equal to him. He is worth all these dam dwarf in cave and many more. So! When time come to fight, I kill that traitor Estarkenden first, for that is my quarrel. Then it may be I have time to balance account for Simbok—who know?"

With that, Ducros very methodically adjusted the rough bandage round his head, and fell to stretching and feeling his gigantic limbs, like an athlete before the contest. Having convinced himself it was Simbok who was being murdered outside our door, he paid no more heed to what was going on there. Gregory and I were not able to ignore it.

There was the same succession of sounds, the ominous interval, the swinging barbaric chant, louder and wilder than before—and after a while a most revolting stench of burning flesh. We had been spared the horror of this ghastly indication when the former sacrifices were made, and we had not far to look for the reason why it was afforded us now. It seemed that in their frenzied haste the savages were bringing down to cast into the river a body half-burned—perhaps only half-dead!

Another new fact soon obtruded itself upon our notice. We could not see the floor of the chamber outside our cell, but there was a markedly different sound of footsteps upon it. A stabbling, swishing sound. Before long a trickle of water had appeared under the door of our cell—and neither was the reason of that far to seek. Evidently these primitive savages, who had never through the centuries been obliged to build houses for themselves, were unequal now to constructing a watertight barrier at the mouth of the caves; the swollen river had already pushed through.

So far as I could remember, there was no stone door between the chamber outside our cell and the corridor of the White Tiger, and no great difference in level. Whatever was going to happen would happen quickly. The dwarfs had tried practical means to stave off the threatened catastrophe. Now that those means had failed they would revert all the more readily to their own superstitious devices. Our turn could not be long coming.

It was not. We heard swift footsteps outside the cell, and a voice that I recognized at once as Jacob Starkenden's.

"Ducros!" he cried.

"I am here, my friend," replied the Frenchman coolly—but there was a depth of meaning in his tones.

"Crayton!"

"I am here."

"Hope!"

"Here."

"Esau Starkenden!"

"He is not here," I said. "There is only the one other with us."

"Who is that?"

"The old man who has been here all along. We do not know his name."

IT was then that I became apprised of an astonishing fact. The pair must have been in these caves together for years, yet it seemed they had never met, and that Jacob Starkenden was actually unaware of the old man's existence. He stared suspiciously through the venthole for several moments before he spoke again: and when he spoke, if anything had been wanting to convince me that Jacob Starkenden was mad, the words he uttered now and the manner in which he uttered them would have done so. It was madman's logic, more terrible to hear than any savagery of threatening; the specious sanity of a man who is completely insane.

"This is the present situation," said Jacob Starkenden, in a ghastly, hollow voice. "This river has risen higher than it has ever been known to rise before, and the Ktawrh are unusually alarmed. They desire sacrifice, and they must have sacrifice. That is to say, one of you will be cast to the White Tiger. The Ktawrh have offered several sacrifices already, but without avail, and that they set down to the fact that an essential part of the ceremony of presenation was neglected. In your case the omission will be supplied. You are to be taken before the priest called Undying One and the priestess called Unaging One, and it is she who must select a sacrifice from among you.

"I will find where Esau Starkenden is being detained, and see that he is present also, so that there will be five of you altogether. It will give you all a better chance of escape—at least for another year. That, as I say, is the present situation. And do not look to me to interfere in your behalf. I could not if I wished. I have one rifle and one round of ammunition only—the rest I destroyed lest you should be foolish enough to try to get possession of it and upset my arrangements. Ducros has already been indiscreet in that respect. My advice to you, then, is to allow yourselves to be conducted to the chamber of presentation without resistance. If you resist, you will be stabbed, I am afraid, and offered to the White Tiger dead."

Ducros shot me an eager glance.

"We are willing," I cried.

The door was then thrown open. We saw the hall packed with dwarfs, all armed with the long knives and standing about an inch deep in water; this also swirled into the rock groove as our door was rolled aside. A hideous growl went up from the Ktawrh at sight of us. Ducros and I crawled out first; by reason of his great breadth of shoulder we could barely squeeze ourselves through the opening abreast. Gregory followed closely behind with the old man. We were immediately separated and surrounded each by a ring of the dwarfs as before, but that was no matter; we had been prepared for it. The main thing was that we had achieved our purpose not to leave that cell one by one; and as we moved off into the caves, hustled along as fast as our fettered feet would permit, we soon realized that the Ktawrh actually did intend to take us to the chamber of presentation in a body.

On and on we went, through glaring hall and dazzling corridor, and even now, I believe, the feeling uppermost in me was one of bewilderment at the place, surely the hugest repository of wealth this world has ever seen. Soon, however, I was recalled to the contemplation of matters more imminent. We drew abreast of the tunnel of white light, and as we did so I noticed that the white light was whiter, that the rumbling roar was many times louder than it had been on our former progress through the caves, and that there came out into our faces a sudden puff of scorching air.

We at length reached the hall where we had had that first audience with Jacob Starkenden, passed through it, through the dim-lit chamber beyond, and into another after that. These three chambers were linked by wide openings in which there was a hanging curtain but no door, and had the appearance of a series of anterooms. The third or innermost, into which we had now entered, was a hall of some dimensions, so broad, in fact, that the original excavators apparently saw fit to leave four great limestone pillars standing to support the roof. Like the one before it, this hall was lighted only by innumerable eyestones set in the sculptured walls, and in addition to the opening through which we had come, it showed a similar curtained recess on the far side.

There was a brief pause. The savages surrounding us with their drawn knives remained erect, but the great throng following behind had stopped short near the entrance and fallen to their knees. Gregory and I stood with our eyes glued to Ducros' face. Then a commotion arose at the back of the chamber, the kneeling throng parted, and we saw Esau Starkenden shepherded in by six or seven dwarfs like our own escort. His great golden mane was liberally shot with white, and the look on his face was the dangerous, hunted look of a wild beast. He had no eyes for us. The five of us were now ranged in a line across the hall, each the nucleus of that hideous cluster of dwarfs; Jacob Starkenden meanwhile took up a position behind us to the right, and stood rifle in hand, leaning against one of the huge pillars.

Then, on the far side of the chamber those hanging curtains were partially drawn, and in the triangular gap between them appeared a Thing. I cannot call it man, for it bore no resemblance to any known or conceivable creature of the human species. From behind us arose a loud hoarse gasp of awe, but I did not look round. I stood staring transfixed at the Thing in front. Its shape was wrapped from head to foot in yellowed linen, like the graveclothes of something long dead, and what little of its skin I could see—the face immediately about the eyes—seemed to speak of awful, unbounded age; it was as though a mummy had risen from its sarcophagus and was gliding silently towards us.

There was another most marked impression that spectacle produced upon me. It may be that my nerves were worked up to the pitch of imagining the nonexistent, but as this creature entered, I could have sworn that the air of the chamber became suddenly chill; with my eyes blindfold I should have known it was there, should have felt its ghastly presence. We were looking at last upon the mysterious and sinister being of these caves, the Undying One.

THE mummy-like form retreated as silently as it had appeared, and returned leading by the hand a woman, slender, clad in loose robe of shimmering white and veiled with some diaphanous material which, though it seemed no heavier than gossamer, prevented us from discerning the lineaments of the face. This apparition, strangely and bewitchingly lovely as it was, afforded me a livelier thrill of horror than the other. Already I had a premonition of what was coming.

The mummy spoke, not words that we could understand, not any tongue resembling the tongues of living races, but an utterance like a mystic echo in some forgotten world. And though we had no notion of what was said, the woman appeared to understand. Slowly she raised one white arm at full length, the hand and index finger alone uncovered by the mist-like robe that enveloped her. She was pointing—pointing straight at Esau Starkenden. He tottered where he stood at the other end of the line, and uttered a queer clucking cry in his throat. His lips moved, but whateyer utterance he made was lost in a staccato growl of anticipation from the serried ranks of savages behind us. Still with one hand outstretched and pointing, the woman suddenly raised the other, lifted the gauze veil from her face, and looked steadily at the victim.

Her gaze was the fixed, uncomprehending gaze of a sleep-walker, yet strangely more intense; and though I had been in some degree prepared for it, the actual revelation of her identity fell upon me with all the staggering violence of surprise. Now beyond question I knew whose lifeless body it was that Gregory Hope and I had found in that inner chamber beyond the eyestone mine. That was the true priestess of these caves. The woman who stood before us, the new Unaging One, was the daughter of the man she had just condemned to a hideous death —Marah Starkenden.

For two or three instants everything remained silent and incredibly still. Then at length the spell was broken—by a loud, hoarse cry from Esau Starkenden.

"Marah!" he screamed. "Marah!"

But it was the old man of our cell who centered attention upon himself at this point. He had been standing next to me in the line, motionless as if frozen to stone, his eyes wide and staring, his mouth agape. Now he came fully to life. He darted forward with the activity of a young man. The savages surrounding him held up an impassable hedge of knives, the points pricked into his flesh, yet he seemed unconscious of pain. Then he began to speak, wildly throwing his withered arms about him, first towards the priestess, then Jacob Starkenden; but it was evidently to the Ktawrh he was speaking, for he used their hideous, gut-

tural tongue, and though I understood not a word it seemed to me he was repeating one thing over and over again.

The effect upon the savages was sudden and astonishing. From one and all of them an angry murmur arose, a cry as it were of horror, doubt, dismay; those who had been kneeling at the back of the chamber sprang to their feet and advanced a pace. Jacob Starkenden darted out from beside the great limestone pillar and yelled to them, striving to drown the cries of the old man, who, foaming at the lips, continued to shout and to scream that same succession of hideous sounds. An angrier murmur went up from the dwarfs. Jacob Starkenden's rifle came round and covered the old man. There was a flash, a thunderous report. The noise of the shot deafened, the smoke half blinded me. When next I was able to see across the chamber, this is what I beheld.

The old man of our cell was standing next to me still, silent but unscathed. The priestess was tearing off and casting from her the veil she had allowed to fall again; in that terrible instant I saw comprehension, complete and staggering, rush back into her dead-white face; she uttered a loud shriek, and sank to her knees.

Beside her the form of the priest, the Undying One; lay like a heap of mouldering graveclothes on the stone floor.

I HAVE but a very jumbled recollection of what next took place; and I fear I should still be unequal to recording it even if I remembered clearly, for the tumult and confusion that ensued in that chamber were of a kind to defy description. This much, however, I can say with fair assurance; but for the firing of that shot, or to be more precise, its amazingly unexpected result, not one of us would have left the grim Hall of Presentation alive.

Mere gunfire would scarcely have held the savages back, for as we had seen from the incident of Ducros' capture their terror of the rifle was short-lived; no doubt like all very primitive peoples they ascribed it simply to some unknown magic, little more marvelous than much to which they already lent belief. What really paralyzed them, I fancy, was the sudden collapse of the priest, the dread being who according to their traditions was old as the immemorial caves and could not die. That paralyzed them indeed. For an instant they fell flat on their faces. And it was at that very instant that Ducros gave the signal.

"Now is time!" he bellowed. "Fight, my friends!"

I pulled on the fetters with all my strength and burst them from my wrists and ankles almost together. I saw Gregory Hope burst his in the same way. He took a flying leap over the prostrate savages toward the old man of our cell, who had fallen in a sort of seizure, caught him and dragged him swiftly to one side. I sprang after them, and incredible though it seems to me as I look back upon it, the three of us were clear of the bodyguard of dwarfs without so much as a scratch.

Now, however, they were struggling to their feet, and in another second I should have had one of the long knives deep into me had not help come from an unforeseen source. Jacob Starkenden dashed forward, aimed a sweeping blow with the butt of his rifle at the dwarfs nearest me, and felled two of them; and before they could recover they were assailed from a fresh quarter. Ducros had leapt in, a knife in either hand. Those knives began to circle at the extreme of Ducros' great reach, and very quickly half a dozen savages had gone down never to rise again.

"To the left!" yelled Jacob Starkenden, pointing with his rifle butt. "The door to the left can be opened."

Ducros shot a doubtful glance at him, but had made up his mind in a flash. "Follow him!" he bellowed. "I hold back these *canaille!*"

Exactly what happened now is another matter upon which my mind has never been at all clear from that day to this; but it seems that between them, thanks to Ducros' enormous length of arm and Jacob Starkenden's clubbed rifle, those two continued to draw an impregnable cordon across the centre of the hall for just the few instants during which we others made good our escape to the door mentioned by Jacob Starkenden.

Greogry Hope thrust the old man into my arms and rushed for Marah Starkenden, who now lay in a dead swoon beside that ghastly pile of graveclothes. Esau Starkenden had already reached her, however. How he had got there I could not at the moment imagine, though I learned afterwards that he too, shackled as he was, had taken a great leap over the prostrate forms of the savages and was clean out of the ring before they arose.

A moment or two later the position had resolved itself into something like this.

The whole of our party were grouped between one of the limestone pillars and the left-side wall of the chamber, in which, at that point, we had found a wide recess blocked by a stone door. The two Starkendens knelt in the recess, frantically heaving sideways upon the door. Gregory Hope bore in his arms the unconscious body of Marah Starkenden. I carried the old man of our cell, while behind us all was Ducros.

Well for us that he stood there; well also that the pillar occurred where it did, for by this time the savages had recovered only too thoroughly from their momentary helplessness, and came on with a howl and a rush. The pillar had the effect of splitting the flood into two streams, and as I had already noted, Ducros had won a knife —one of the very effective Ktawrh knives —for each hand. Gregory Hope's jackknife he had not been obliged to use at all. In the few instants we stood there waiting for the Starkendens to get that door wide open I saw the dwarfs surge up to Ducros again and again like a wave, and recede like a wave on either hand, leaving a fringe of hairy bodies on the stone floor, while Ducros' knives, already crimson to the hilt, drew back for a fresh sweep.

In another instant we were inside the lateral chamber, which we discovered to be about twenty feet square, empty, and lighted only by one skull-lamp set in a niche in the wall. Gregory Hope and I laid down our burdens at one side and sprang back to help close the door behind us.

Ducros had already retreated into the recess, stooping under its great rock lintel and thrusting and slashing furiously as he came. This doorway was larger than any I remembered having seen elsewhere in the caves; it measured quite six feet either way, and the stone door must have weighed the best part of a ton; but so accurately did it fit into the great stone grooves, so smoothly it ran over the rollers, that one man could have closed it with ease had there been none to oppose him.

We soon knew, however, that there was opposition. The dwarfs were pushing madly against us to hold the door open, and I think they would have succeeded but for the fact that Ducros, who was by this time past the line of the door, prevented them from getting a purchase on the edge. Inside the chamber, we four were able to throw our whole weight directly against the other edge, and after a few moments of wild struggle we had got the barrier well nigh closed.

There was the usual stone stopper to retain it in position when it met the jamb, but as it neared that point a long hairy arm shot through the narrow slit, and that arm bore a knife. Ducros started back—the point had actually pricked him. In another instant the wrist was pinched between the door and the wall, the knife dropped to the floor on our side, and a scream of rage and anguish came through to us from the other.

Ducros slashed at the grisly, hairy hand. As we allowed the door to come back an inch or two I saw the released arm slide away out of sight, a spurt of blood—then we heaved forward again, the door crashed into position, and we had thrust in the stone stopper to hold it. We heard furious drummings on the stone, but for the moment we were safe.

DUCROS satisfied himself the door was secure, coolly wiped the blood out of his eyes with the sleeve of his tunic, and turned to Jacob Starkenden, who had retreated to the far side of this chamber and taken post in front of an opening in the wall.

"Now, you Estarkenden," said Ducros, "I think time has come to deal with you. You have given my good native Simbok to those dam savage, and you give me up also. You are twice traitor, my friend, and if you know some prayer, you do wise saying him pretty quick, by dam!"

Jacob Starkenden clubbed the rifle he still held, but uttered no word; and as he stood there facing Ducros, for the first time I became aware of an astonishing change in his appearance. It seems strange to me now, that I should have noticed it at such a juncture, but I remember nevertheless very clearly that I did notice, and I can only attribute that to the fact that the change must have been exceedingly marked. Jacob Starkenden's eyes were alight, yet it was the fire of excitement rather than that insane glare they had shown in the other chamber. For any indication of madness I looked in vain.

Ducros took a step towards him, but before he could take another, Esau Starkenden had bounded between the pair of them and confronted Ducros with a gesture of fury.

"Fool!" he screamed. "Is this a time for your private murders—would you kill the one man who can show us a way out?"

Ducros paused, as if struck by a consideration he had up to that time overlooked. In that short fight in the Hall of

Presentation he had received a score of wounds and he was standing in a circle of ugly crimson drips. There was a drawn look on his gaunt, granite-like face, but no sign of excitement.

"So!" said Ducros deliberately. "That is one thing I do not think of. I have good right to kill this Estarkenden, my friends, but for sake of you I give him up."

"Show us a way out!" boomed Esau Starkenden to the other. "That shall settle all scores!"

Jacob Starkenden remained with his back to the doorway. "I want you to know," he said, in a tone as astonishingly altered as his appearance, "that when I called to you to come to the left I wished to help you, as I do now. Behind me is a chamber leading to a stairway up through the cliffs above us. That was the way out I had in mind. I have just been through to examine that chamber. I had expected to find the farther door open. But that door is shut and fastened—*from the other side.*"

We stared at him in silent dismay, while the furious pounding on the door behind us gathered in volume.

I heard Gregory Hope mutter, "Buried alive!"

"One moment, my friend," retorted Ducros. "You come to conclusion too quick, I think. If we are bury alive and cannot get out for ever, why do those dam savage make so much beating on this door, *hein?* Is it because they would take us and sacrifice to White Tiger, *hein?* I say, perhaps. But what if they are bury alive also? Now you listen to me, you all.

"You Crayton, you are honest man, I think. This Estarkenden is dam traitor twice and I take no more chance with him. You go to see if he speak true about that door, my friend, while I stay guarding this one. You Hope, you leave that girl for one moment and you get some sense in head of that dam very old fellow of your prison. And you Esau Estarkenden, in meantime I take off those chain from you; for I think you are too slow if it come to running for life!"

I dashed into the next chamber—an exact replica of the one I had just left, even down to its solitary skull-lamp in the wall. One trial sufficed to convince me that the door, which contained no venthole, was secure beyond all possibility of opening from this side; and I was turning to go, when I found myself face to face with Jacob Starkenden. And now again, more forcibly than ever, I was struck by the alteration in his demeanour.

"Well, was I right, Crayton?" he said.

"It's certainly a fixture," I replied shortly, making as if to pass him. But Jacob Starkenden still barred the way.

"Do you think I should have lied to you about it?" he persisted, almost wistfully. "My brother has said that if I could show you a way to the open air it should clear all scores. Do I not want all scores cleared —now that my chance has come?"

"What do you mean?" I gasped, thinking I had been too hasty in crediting him with sanity regained.

He waved an arm towards the caves behind us. "The Undying One, Crayton, that is what I mean," he said. "There was more than occult chemistry in his drugs—there was his own diabolical personality and will. Now he is dead, the influence dies with him, and I am free! And I—I had to tell someone, before it is too late. I may not come out of this affair alive."

Perfectly astounded at what the man said, I hurried back to the others and reported to Ducros my ill success with the door. Ducros was kneeling beside our aged fellow captive, who sat up supported between him and Gregory Hope.

"You old fellow," said Ducros, "You think pretty hard now, by dam! You are long time in these cave, and it seem from what Hope and Crayton say that you have travel to strange place. You know where we are?"

The old man looked round, feebly but with an air of intelligence, and shook his head. "There are many chambers like this," he said.

"So! Then I tell you, my friend. You remember where we all go from prison?"

"I remember that, yes."

"This chamber is to left hand side of that place, if you stand to face door where that very old priest is coming out. You understand?"

"Yes. The Undying One. I remember. I saw him fall—"

"And you have fit, my friend, and we carry you in here, and we shut door so those dam savage cannot come after. You hear that noise—it is those savage who would enter."

THE OLD man's face was suddenly lined with horror, but Ducros patted his knee in a gesture of kindliness strangely out of conceit with his own gaunt and bloody appearance, and went on. "Now you listen, my friend." he said, "for it may be you are one man who can help us when we are able no more. In front there is

empty chamber, but door of it is fasten on other side, so we cannot go through. But I think perhaps I open this door again and fight those dam savage. If we are doing so, is there some way to open air except those hole in cliff which are now drown by river?"

"There is one other way," he said, after thinking for a moment with closed eyes. "Another way into this same passage beyond the chamber where we are. And that leads to a stair through the mountain—the only stair I know."

"So! And if we open this door now and fight those dam savage, and if we win, my friend, we can go to that passage?"

Our aged fellow captive shook his head, shuddering involuntarily. Jacob Starkenden, who had been following the dialogue, gave a mutter of assent.

Ducros swung round and faced him. "What are you meaning by that, you Estarkenden?" he demanded.

"I know the passage he is talking about," returned the other quietly. "You have all see the outer end of it. The inner leads within a few feet of the White Tiger."

The old man pricked up his ears and leaned forward, speaking louder. "When the furnace burns low," he said, "it is possible to get past it to the stair. Now the furnace burns high. Nothing human will be able to walk that way and live—for many days."

"So!" said Ducros, as he rose to his feet. He seemed interested rather than abashed by this awful intelligence. "Now I see what happen, my friends. Mouth of cave on cliff is fill with water, so nobody take departure that way except for drowning. White Tiger very warm just now, and nobody pass him alive. This way is block up with door in from of us, so we are in tight hole, by dam! But those savage are in same one, *hein?*" He paused listening.

The confused drumming and humming on the far side of the door had now given place to measured, thunderous beats, several seconds elapsing between each. It seemed to me the savages must be hurling themselves into the recess in a sort of concerted charge but Jacob Starkenden thought otherwise.

"It is a ram!" he cried. "There are great baulks of timber stored in the caves—they are used as fuel for the furnace."

Ducros ran to the door and examined it rapidly all over, his great brows puckered in thought. He then turned to us, readjusting the bandage round his head. "You listen, you all!" he said quickly. "If those dam savage use batter-ram, I think this door he not stand up for long. He break down, and that batter-ram come through very swift. So! I give order what to do then. You, Hope and Crayton, you stand in doorway with these two knife and cut hands off those savage who carry batter-ram.

"You, Esau, you pull like hell, by dam! You, Hope and Crayton, I give you signal then to drop those knife near my feet and help those Estarkenden carry batter-ram to that other door and break him down. I hold back those savage while you are doing so. When that door break also you come back for the Miss Estarkenden and this very old fellow, and you run for your life to that stair. I will come behind for rearguard. Now, my friends, you are understanding what is to be done?"

We all assented.

"So!" cried Ducros. "I prepare also. You Jacob Estarkenden, you give me that rifle!"

Ducros took the weapon—it was one of the service rifles we had ourselves brought up country—tore open the case in the butt and drew out the pull-through. There was a tough cord attached, with which he very swiftly and firmly bound one of the long knives to the muzzle of the rifle.

"So!" he cried again when the operation was finished. "If it is to be fight to death, my friends, I am best with bayonet! And if she break, I continue with butt or with those knife, whatever seem good to me."

We took up our positions, ready to rush in when the crash came. It could not be long, for the savages, evidently in utter desperation, were hurling their ram against the door with terrific force. A crack appeared across the great stone door; three or four more of the thundering impacts widened it; then, with a hollow, splintering boom the door broke into several pieces and collapsed, while the end of a stout bole of dark timber was hurled through the opening.

Gregory and I had sprung back for an instant to escape the falling stone. We now leapt in again, slashing madly at the arms of the savages nearest us on the ram. The Starkendens had meanwhile seized our end and were hauling upon it for dear life. The original momentum of the bole gave them a start, and for a second or two there was little resistance: our move had manifestly taken the savages by surprise. They quickly realised it, however, and rushed in with a hoarse yell to take fresh hold. Gregory and I pushed right into the recess and cleared the middle of the ram alto-

gether, but many of the dwarfs were now clinging to the other end. For an instant the great timber trembled in the balance. I heard a grunt of rage behind me, and saw both Ducros' feet feeling for a purchase against the slabs of fallen stone. The log began to come our way, faster and faster. I knew what that meant. Ducros had taken hold, and was throwing all his tremendous weight and strength into the scale.

The savages clung desperately, but those on the ram had no free hand to defend themselves against our knives, and the rest could not come to their help in any great numbers because of the restricted space in that doorway. Now the last of their ram-bearers were swept up to us, swept one after another on to the points of our knives. An instant later the ram was wholly ours, and Ducros' improvised bayonet had pushed in between Gregory and me.

"To the batter-ram now!" he cried.

We scrambled back over the broken stonework, dropped our knives just behind Ducros' feet, and rushed to the aid of the Starkendens. The two men could barely hold that great log up off the floor by half-supporting it on their bent knees, and even four of us found it as much as we could carry; but our lives were at stake, and it is never safe to assign limits to the effort a man can make in that situation. Soon we had the log through into the far chamber and were hurling it against the obstructing door.

Behind us the battle for the other doorway was now in full swing. Ducros lost no time in shaking down to his work, and once begun, that work went on like machinery—curiously like it. The noise of our ram drowned every other sound, of course, when it met the door, but in the intervals, as we half turned to run the great log backwards, I heard a quick cycle of sounds that occurred with sickening regularity—a scrunching stab, a gasp or a cough, and a grunt from Ducros as he wrenched the long steel knife free. I even caught momentary glimpses clean through the next chamber and into the doorway beyond.

Ducros was crouching slightly, resting one foot on a slab of the broken door that had fallen straight; the rifle-butt at his right side moved backwards and forwards very fast; sometimes I could see the bayonet itself shooting in and out like a piston. Time and again the savages dashed up to him, to lunge with the knives or to drag aside their dead, of whom there were already beginning to be a grim rampart, but never did I see one savage come within reach of that flickering tongue of steel without paying the penalty.

The two battles went on, ours with the great block of ancient masonry, Ducros' against a whole tribe of the most dangerous savages in the world; and for the present that door in front proved as impregnable to us as the human door in our rear was proving to the dwarfs. None of them yelled now—they were grimly and silently concentrating on killing that one gigantic, indomitable man who stood between them and their revenge. What cries arose at all arose from Ducros, who had broken into a sort of wild, berserk chant; and that grew louder and wilder as the fight continued.

"So!" he bellowed. "There is one more for you, Simbok! And one more! And one more! Simbok was good native, my friends! Now he go to happy hunting grounds of his father, but he not go alone! He have large guard of honour this day! And one more! Come to me, you small people! Come to me, I tell you! Rosalie wait for you here! She is thirsty yet! Rosalie drink much red wine to honour my dead native Simbok, but she drink more before we finish!"

Meantime we four exerted ourselves as we could never have done in our lives before, but still without effect. Whether it was because our power was less than that of the swarms of savages, or this door of harder rock than the other, we hurled the ram against it in vain. And we were tiring fast. Our breath came in great, choking sobs, we no longer ran to and fro but reeled, while the heavy bole swayed and sagged ominously at every turn.

There came at last a slackening of the fight behind us—it seemed that even in their fury and desperation the dwarfs were staggered by the frightful losses they had sustained. But there was no slackening in Ducros' wild chant.

"Come to me, you small people!" he cried. "Why are you hang back, *hein?* It is not that way when I meet you before! You have not hang back when you kill my good native! Why you hang back now? Come to me, I tell you! There is yet some more require to balance account for Simbok! So! And there is one more for you, Simbok!"

His voice had risen to a great shout, echoing and re-echoing through the caves —*Simbok, Simbok, Simbok!*

It was at this instant that Gregory Hope, who was foremost on the log, threw up his head with a sharp jerk.

"Hold still, for God's sake!" he gasped, and stood listening.

We all listened, but for my part I could hear only Ducros' wild chant coming through from the first chamber.

"What is it, Hope?" panted Esau Starkenden at last. The sweat was sluicing from his face down the great golden beard and onto the log.

"Somebody on the other side!" cried Gregory. "I'll swear I heard a shout. Hold the log!"

He flung himself into the recess, laid both hands flat on the stone door, and heaved violently this way and that. To our utter amazement it gave about half an inch—sideways. We now dropped the log and crowded round him. The door was undoubtedly moving. Now there was half a foot of clearance between it and the jamb, and a head appeared dimly outlined in that gap. The mere appearance of that head was startling enough, for it bore no hair, and very little skin—it was covered with huge blisters and raw, gaping burns. For an instant or two we could make nothing of the newcomer. Then we recognised him, and staggered back, all four of us, with one loud gasp.

It was Simbok.

CHAPTER XI

AN END AND A BEGINNING

THE native crawled forward without a word, staring blankly at us, and as he emerged farther into the light we saw that not only his eyebrows and hair, but half his clothes had been burned off him. Not one word could any of us find to say to Simbok, either, and no sound came but the sounds behind us, where Ducros' battle had broken out afresh and Ducros' wild chant rose louder than ever.

"There is one more for you, Simbok!" he yelled.

The native waited no longer. He sprang to his feet, pushed a way through us, and dashed headlong into the other chamber.

"Moi viens, M'sieur!" we heard him shout.

"Quick!" cried Gregory, turning to follow. "Carry the old man, Crayton—I'll take Marah!"

Back in the first lateral chamber we came upon a strange sight—one that will remain very vividly impressed upon my mind till the day of my death. Simbok had possessed himself of the two spare knives, and knelt with one knee on the fallen stone, looking straight ahead and uttering not a syllable. Ducros had wheeled and was staring down at Simbok as if he were looking at a ghost.

It was a good thing the native had taken post beside his master, for at that very instant one of the Ktawrh, seeing Ducros' attention diverted, darted in under the bayonet and thrust savagely upwards. The stroke never got home, however. Simbok had seen it coming, and met it half-way; with a perfectly timed lunge he buried one of his knives deep in the dwarf's throat.

"These dam savage not kill you, Simbok?" demanded Ducros again, as if still unable to believe his eyes. "You speak to me, my friend?"

"Non tuer Simbok," the latter muttered swiftly, wrenching out the dripping blade and still keeping his eyes straight in front of him. "Simbok plenty burn. *Maint'non M'sieur* muchee *blessê—y-a porte ouverte —moi pense temps s'en aller, M'sieur!"*

The savages had seen that open door behind us now; they vented a fierce howl, and rushed up in a mass. For two or three seconds there was a terrific struggle in the doorway, Ducros on his feet but crouching and thrusting down, Simbok on one knee, hacking and slashing upwards. Again the savages charged in solid column three or four abreast, and but for the breastwork of dead that at once rose before them, I believe Ducros and Simbok must have been hurled back into the chamber by sheer force of impact.

This sudden revival of the contest called Ducros fully to himself. "You get through other door now!" he bellowed to us without looking round. "You call when you are ready to close him, and I come!"

We had found our aged fellow captive kneeling up and supporting Marah Starkenden's head on his arm, but unable from very feebleness to do more. The girl had remained unconscious all through that terrible fight—mercifully so, for the broken stone in the doorway now looked like huge joints of raw flesh, the floor of the chamber behind literally ran blood like a shambles.

Jacob Starkenden seized the skull-lamp, then dashed into the second chamber for the lamp there as well. I took the old man in my arms and, exhausted though I was by our labours on the battering-ram, lifted him without difficulty, for his emaciation had left him light as a child. Gregory

Hope and Esau Starkenden had picked up the lifeless form of the girl and were carrying her between them. It takes long to describe our escape in words, but the escape itself was made with the speed of a swift dream.

We rushed through the inner chamber and beyond, into a broad corridor that would have been pitch dark but for the two lamps Jacob Starkenden carried. Here we laid down our burdens, formed up against the door, gave it a trial push to one side, and having satisfied ourselves it could be rolled to immediately the moment came, yelled to Ducros to follow.

Simbok arrived first. He bundled through the aperture, swung around and faced it, knives in hand. Then Ducros was with us. We heaved furiously on the door, got it clean home, secured it with the stone stopper and jumped to our feet.

"Swiftly now!" cried Ducros. "They come again soon!"

And sure enough, almost before the stopper was into its mortise there again began a measured, thunderous pounding such as we had heard before: the savages had evidently repossessed themselves of the battering-ram. We had already seen what they could effect with that implement, and while four of us had been unable to make any impression upon the door we had just closed, a dozen infuriated savages might be more successful. We sped on—into the unknown bowels of the earth.

VERY soon the air of the passage became noticeably hot, then stiflingly hot; and the farther we advanced the hotter it grew. Now, also, every other sound was drowned in a steady, deafening roar, of which I could shrewdly guess the source. A moment or two later the corridor on ahead was filled as it were with a ball of incandescent light; I saw Jacob Starkenden, the foremost of our party, pass into this region and straightway become a weird, ghostly figure, white as driven snow, the flame of his two lamps completely obliterated. Gregory Hope and Esau Starkenden entered the zone and were similarly transfigured, and at last I myself had drawn abreast of the opening from which the light came. And I could not forbear to look down it. For two or three instants I was blinded by the glare; not until I looked through half-closed lids could I discern anything.

Then, however, I saw. That opening on our left hand broadened out in a long cone; at the farther end, some thirty or forty yards from where I stood, was a huge furnace in full blast. The surrounding limestone walls were evidently raised to white heat, and the effect was to throw out into the corridor along which we were advancing a shaft of illumination like a theatrical spotlight magnified to titanic proportions. And in the midst of the blazing mass there was outlined a gigantic animal head, the jaws wide open and pouring forth a veritable torrent of flame.

In the horrid fascination of this spectacle I even forgot the peril behind, and I do not know how long I should have remained stupidly staring had I not heard Ducros' voice in my very ear.

"Forward, my friend!" he bellowed. "Those dam savage are through!"

It was enough—I needed no second urging, but rushed on at redoubled speed. And that was all I was ever to see of the Great White Tiger of the Ktawrh caves.

Beyond the scope of that strange limelight we were soon dependent upon the lamps again, and by their doubtful crimson flame I saw many tributary passages running out of the main one. The latter was easily distinguishable by its width and straightness, however, and Jacob Starkenden never paused or faltered. Yet even so, before we came to the end I had already caught the sound of wild yelling in our rear, clearly audible now that we had left the overwhelming roar of the furnace behind.

The corridor ended at the foot of a stairway, narrow and steep; up this we scrambled, the savages now actually bounding and howling at our heels; but Ducros also was behind us, and from time to time Ducros turned and stabbed with his bayonet, whereupon something ceased to howl and thudded away down into the darkness.

Then, at long last—for this stairway seemed to reach to the very skies—there came a hoarse cry from Jacob Starkenden. I looked up. Never should I have believed that any sight upon this earth could thrill a man with such unbounded delight. What I saw there a little way above me was *daylight*. A moment later I was in the open air. I have a confused recollection of seeing the others stand gaping and gasping round the black hole from which we had emerged, and of turning round to behold first Simbok and then Ducros heave himself out.

These latter turned also, and not an instant too soon, for there, almost simultaneously, appeared two long knives in a pair

of hairy hands, and a horrible, animal face, thick lips drawn back from the yellow fangs in a grin of fury. Quickly lunging with his bayonet, Ducros ran the creature through and shook him off the steel so that he went headlong backwards down the stair. A second dwarf sprang up, only to meet the same fate.

Ducros glanced swiftly over his shoulder, then all round him. The stairhead was cut not in a flat surface of rock, but on the flank of a bold, beetling promontory which must have overhung it by several feet. Beyond, the cliff-top extended for some distance in a sort of rough natural platform, level for the most part but dotted with many big, weather-rounded boulders. It was upon these that Ducros' eye now fell.

"You bring stone, you all!" he shouted. "It is require to close this stair!"

Gregory had laid down the still unconscious form of Marah Starkenden; I placed our old fellow prisoner beside her, and with Gregory and the Starkendens ran to the nearest boulder. It was the smallest as well as the nearest that we could see, but although we heaved frantically upon it, at the end of about a minute we had failed to move it at all. Meanwhile Ducros and Simbok were as busy as they had been at any stage of the fight, and when I looked in that direction I observed that two or three of the dwarfs lay dead *outside the stair*.

By this time Ducros had gathered what was amiss. "You, Hope," he cried, "you take my place here! I think I am require for that stone, by dam!"

The two had very quickly changed places. Then Ducros hurled himself upon the great rock. The Starkendens and I were on either side of him heaving and straining as before, but the noticeable fact is that whereas previously the rock would not so much as leave its bed, now at once it began to move; it tilted perhaps half an inch, then more, and in a few seconds we had it rolling without halt towards the stairhead. We got that enormous boulder on to the brink of the opening, where it poised for an instant, overhung, the foremost savages madly leaping up and thrusting at it with their bare hands; then the stone toppled over, bounded down about half a dozen stairs, and lodged with a hollow crash.

Ducros peered after it, stood erect, and as he did so, for the first time I noticed in his eyes a strange look which I did not altogether like. He must have shed enough blood, I fancy, to fill the veins of some men, and it seemed to me that at last even the titanic Ducros was beginning to feel the loss of it. He gave no other sign of discomfort, however, but stalked swiftly out across the rock platform, scanned the mountainside in every direction, then ran back to the stairhead.

"There is yet more require," he muttered grimly, peering down again. "They perhaps shift that one stone, or it may be get past. I would make clean job here, my friends!"

With that he picked up the dead bodies of the savages, hurled them one after another into the stairway, selected another boulder and led us to it. This was even huger than the first; a slight slope helped us, however, and when once we had got the stone moving it proved easier to roll. Down at last it went, falling not with a crash but with another sound far less pleasant to listen to. The opening was not only blocked; it was cemented up!

Ducros drew himself to his full gigantic height, swaying slightly.

"It is require to go away from here very quick," he remarked in a rather significant tone. "Come, my friends!"

OUR preparations were soon complete. I tore up the scant remainder of my shirt and bound their wounds for Gregory and Simbok—who had both received several in that brief battle at the stairhead—but Ducros waved me impatiently aside when I offered to bind his; indeed, he seemed scarcely to need it, for the blood that covered him from head to foot had caked upon him.

Marah Starkenden had partially regained her senses, but we deemed it wise not to bring her further out of the merciful oblivion yet; we wrapped her in our coats, and Gregory and Esau Starkenden carried her on crossed hands. Jacob Starkenden and I took the old man by either arm, half supporting, half carrying him; we expected he would have to be helped every inch of the way down country—and we were right. Then, Ducros and Simbok leading, we struck off over the mountainside.

At any other time I should have been curious to examine the locality upon which we had emerged, yet I could gather little about it now. I was dazed, exhausted, hungry to get away—far away from all the horrors we had left behind; and moreover there was little to be seen. A fitful rain was falling from the overcast sky, and everywhere the moist, misty atmosphere was

rendered still denser by another cause. When once we had drawn well out into the open we could see a vast column of smoke rising from the crater-like depression in the mountainside. There, evidently, was the chimney of the furnace; and it was the roar of the fire beneath which now came to our ears—came shouting up out of that gigantic flue and drowning, hereabouts at any rate, the more distant drone of the river.

Away eastward, on our left hand as we retreated, the land dipped sharply, rising again farther east in what looked to me like a forest of great primaeval trees, their tops blanketed in mist. The valley betrayed signs of rude cultivation, and once or twice in the distance I caught a glimpse of animals grazing—apparently goats—and of one or two erections that might have been shelters made of tree boughs. It must be this valley, I reflected, that supplied the Ktawrh with food, and the forest beyond that furnished fuel for the eternal fire. Normally, no doubt, a certain number of the tribe would have been out here; now, however, although we kept very alertly on the watch, we saw none. It seemed that at this critical time of their year—the period of threatened flood and propitiatory sacrifice—the whole hideous community were gathered into the caves themselves.

Ducros led the way at a round pace, looking back from time to time to assure himself we were keeping up, and listening to Simbok in manifest astonishment. I heard an occasional murmur of talk behind me, but it was to Simbok that I too was listening. I had learned a good deal of his patois on our way up country, and with the help of the French that plentifully interspersed it I now managed to make out what Simbok said. He was recounting his escape.

It seems that when Ducros interfered in his behalf Simbok at once took advantage of the commotion—and also of the smoke from Ducros' rifle-shot—to bolt. He never dreamed that Ducros, the ally of Jacob Starkenden, would be in any danger from the Ktawrh, but he had already seen that that protection did not extend to himself. Simbok therefore rushed headlong from the scene. In his confusion he took the path leading to the furnace, and only realised his mistake when it was too late to retreat. *Simbok then plunged through the skirts of the fire.*

He was frightfully burned, and lay unconscious on the far side for some time—how long, he could not tell; but at last, finding himself still alive and free, he concluded the dwarfs had not suspected which way he really went and were searching for him in other parts of the caves. So Simbok crawled ahead. He had actually found the stair and was climbing it, when he heard footsteps coming down. (I imagine, by the way, that this must have been the last of the Ktawrh goatherds and cultivators coming from the upper air.) Simbok retreated again, hid himself on one of those caverns lying off the main corridor, and hung about near the entrance for a long while.

Finding that his master did not appear, however, and knowing that the caves were now threatened with flooding, Simbok became alarmed, and ventured back along the main corridor with a view to gaining some hint of what was taking place. He found the door of the second lateral chamber open, but closed it lest the dwarfs should come through and find him. At last, hearing the noise of our ram—he had been prevented by the two closed doors, apparently, from hearing Jacob Starkenden's rifle-shot at all—Simbok surmised that Ducros, now determined to leave the caves, had found the door shut and was endeavouring to batter it down.

It was not until he opened the door a fraction of an inch to listen and actually heard Ducros shouting his name, that he realised there was a fight broken out between Ducros and the Ktawrh. Simbok then yelled to Ducros at the top of his lungs to make for the door. And it must have been that cry which Gregory Hope heard, before we ourselves pushed the door right open.

Such is the story I heard Simbok tell Ducros as we crossed the hillside, and though I afterwards made him repeat his tale to me in more intelligible speech, he did not deviate from it in any particular; and I could only conclude that Simbok was speaking the truth. Two facts seemed clear from what he said.

At the time when Simbok rushed past the White Tiger, the fire could not have been built up to the gigantic proportions it afterwards reached: that final stoking must have been reserved for the final sacrifice, when no doubt the dwarfs intended to cast us all into the flames one by one as we were chosen by the Unaging One. It is fairly plain also that the Ktwarh, to the very last, pinned faith to the sacrifice by fire as a means of ensuring their own safety. Up to the moment when we

broke into those side chambers and barred their path there was, so far as they were to know, a way open for them to the cliffs above; yet as it appeared, not one of them had taken advantage of it.

We must have been about a quarter of a mile from the stairtop when I saw Ducros suddenly stumble forward like a man who has lost his footing. He drew himself erect, swung around and for a moment stood quite still, staring back at the smoke of the fire. That strange appearance in his eyes was now very noticeable indeed.

"So!" he cried abruptly. "It was good fight, my friends, and now it has come to an end. I die!"

Before even the astonished Simbok could catch him, he had fallen at full length. I left the old man in Jacob Starkenden's hands and ran to Ducros, kneeling beside him and loosening his tunic at the neck, but he shook his head very positively.

"It is no good, Crayton," he said, his great gaunt face involuntarily writhing into a grin of agony. "I take many wound in my time, and I know last one when he come. It is when that dam savage stab through doorway at beginning of this fight. He stab deep and he find me out, but I do not say anything to you, for I fear you are losing courage. But it is good fight, by dam! Many dwarf I kill to balance account for you, Simbok, for I think then you are gone to White Tiger for ever."

Simbok was on his knees, wringing his hands in an access of grief such as I should never have believed that sullen, phlegmatic native could feel. *Moi non sais, M'sieur!"* he groaned, the tears streaming down his blistered, hairless face. *"C'est Simbok qu'a ferme porte, c'est Simbok qu' a tue M'sieur!"*

THEN for the first time in my acquaintance with him, Ducros' granite-like features softened. He looked up at the native in silence, and I knew at that moment that even as Simbok had loved his master, probably alone of all God's creatures, so Ducros, somewhere deep down in his rugged heart, harboured a genuine love for the faithful Tongkinese. Though it would be difficult to say which of them had up to then been less demonstrative of his affection, outwardly.

"You listen now, my friends," said Ducros at length. "There is not time for much words, and I give order quickly for after I die. You will please take off this coat from me."

As gently as possible we drew the garment from him. Ducros clenched his teeth while we were doing this, but not so much as a murmur escaped him. The tunic was slashed to ribands, and stiff as a board with congealed blood.

"You feel in pocket, Crayton," he said.

I did so, laying out the articles one by one on the rocky earth. Among them were a small, bloodstained French-English phrase-book,* and one magnificent cut eyestone, fully as big as a walnut.

"Those other thing you give to Simbok now, Crayton," said the giant, "and he perhaps think of me sometime when he look at them. That gem you will please keep for him till you come to civilize land once more. Then you sell gem and see he have silver for him, for Simbok is now wanting silver. He will be king over my people."

The native stared with mingled incredulity, grief and adoration. *"Moi fort mauvais roi, M'sieur!"* he gasped. *"C's hommes veut M'sieur, non veut moi!"*

"You take this coat, Simbok, my friend," returned Ducros grimly, "and you tell those fellow I die in great fight and make you king in my place. And if they not obey you I come back to them when they not expect, by dam!"

We had hardly gathered up the coat and the melancholy legacy when I heard footsteps behind us. Marah Starkenden, pale as a ghost but evidently understanding what was going on around her, had drawn near, leaning heavily on the arm of Gregory Hope. Esau Starkenden made as if to keep her away from the dying man, but she shook him off almost angrily, and knelt by Ducros.

He looked up at her, out of eyes that began to take on a film. "So!" he cried. "You come in time, Miss Estarkenden. I have been great scoundrel to you not long ago. I ask you to forgive before I die."

She whispered to him in a voice we could barely catch. "You have given your life to make amends, Ducros," she said. "My father has told me how you fought for us today. You are a brave man and a good man."

Again Ducros' gaunt face softened, though there was now more than a tinge of grim pride in the softening. "I am not good man, Miss Estarkenden," he said,

*I have since learned that in Ducros' village, that pathetic *syllabaire* has been raised to the dignity of a sacred record, just as divine honours are paid to the memory of Ducros.—J.C.

"and I was not ever good man. But I know good woman when I am seeing her, for my wife also was good woman. I fight many fight, but I say this truly—I not remember one time that I was afraid."

He paused, turning his head from her to the Starkenden brothers.

"There is one thing more I ask now," he went on after a while. "You two Estarkenden are quarrel and hate for many year. That is not good thing for two brother, my friends. I would see you shake the hand to wash out all score as this Esau Estarkenden has said in the cave."

The pair looked one another straight in the face for the first time since we began our bid for liberty They continued to look at one another, searchingly yet uncomfortably. I have already mentioned the amazing change I had noticed in Jacob Starkenden when he spoke to me in that second chamber off the Hall of Presentation. The change was maintained—his face was the face of an undoubtedly sane man.

And in Esau Starkenden also there was a change, one less astonishing but hardly less palpable. I saw no sign of that furtive, grasping expression he had worn when I first knew him and for many weeks after, or of the dangerous hunted look he had shown during our captivity. Esau Starkenden's misshapen countenance was now cast in a mould of profound sadness, and if it were possible, beautified by it.

From the rocky earth between them came Ducros' voice, fast weakening. "I would see you two Estarkenden shake the hand," he said, "and if I am to see I must see quickly."

Esau Starkenden glanced down at Ducros' upturned face, then stepped towards his brother. He held out his hand, the iron ring still on the wrist.

"I was a black-hearted villain at the beginning, brother," rumbled through his great beard.

"And I carried on the villainy," replied Jacob Starkenden, eagerly clasping the extended hand. "May God grant us power to forgive and forget!"

"That is good speaking, you Estarkenden!" cried Ducros. "Now you listen, you all! I have made clean job back there, and I tell you reason of that. It is because those dwarf are not good people for living in world of today. Those cave are shut fast, and I think that river he rise some more yet. You go quickly, I tell you! If some day you come back here to find more gem you can bury me, but I think those bird not leave much for burying, by dam! You make for down country now, and you are safe to live long year. And it may be sometime you think of Ducros."

"We shall never forget that we all owe our lives to you, Ducros," said Gregory Hope, his lip trembling. "I think you are the bravest man I ever met—and certainly the strongest!"

Suddenly there arose a strange faint sound in the quarter from which we had come. Peering back across the mist-laden mountainside I saw that the great column of smoke from the cave furnace had taken on a changed aspect: it was become whiter, and rose straighter and higher into the sky.

Ducros had heard. He struggled out of my arms, got to his knees, stood erect, strode half a dozen paces towards the caves; and there he stood, staring straight in front of him and raising both arms at full stretch above his head.

"I have said come to me, you little people," he cried in a great voice, "and many of you have come for last time. Now I come to join you!"

He staggered back, crashed to the ground, and lay still. Ducros was dead.

And at that very instant, as if to hymn his passing, the strange faint sound behind us swelled to a loud mutter; the distant mountainside heaved like a wave; enormous masses of black shot up through the tall white-cloud; then came a terriffic long-drawn roar like the roar of heavy guns in salvo.

One and all we crouched and covered low down upon the quivering earth.

Now I knew what had been in Ducros' mind when he enjoined us to get away quickly. He had foreseen the result of sealing that stair head. And he had been a true prophet in the death hour. The swollen river had finally burst in, swept through the immemorial caves, reached the furnace. For one instant, vast volumes of steam were pent in those caves. At the next—what we had just seen. The ancient tradition of the Ktawrh was fulfilled. They had ceased to exist.

THE hall of "Havenview" wore an unsettled air. Not only was it stacked high with corded trunks and brass-angled boxes, but other articles were to be seen, among them rifles and mosquito nets and specimen cases, which spoke of more than mere departure along the beaten tracks of travel. Unsettled was the atmosphere of the dining room, too, where a small party

to be split in twain on the morrow had eaten rather at haphazard off an emergency dinner service and were now taking wine from a scratch team of glasses.

Esau Starkenden, his great beard and tousled hair a good deal more golden and less shot with white than I had known them not so very long ago, sat at the head of the board. His brother Jacob, whose hair was certainly never going to darken again on this side of eternity, sat at the foot.

There were two chairs that had been filled earlier in the evening but were now empty, and one other white-haired man, who sat opposite me. This was Jabez Winslow, formerly of the University of Sacramento. His were the rifles and mosquito curtains and specimen cases out in the hall. Professor Winslow had been earnestly dissuaded from making his expedition of the morrow to a certain obscure hinterland far south, but the dissuasion had not shaken his purpose in the least; indeed, he had not even been unanimously dissuaded, for Jacob Starkenden was to accompany him, and showed a keenness upon the affair little less pronounced than the professor's own.

"It strikes me as sufficiently ludicrous, Brother," he said, "that after spending sixteen years in that very rich gem-field I should have neglected its possibilities in the way I did. Twice have I left the caves, and two eyestones only, out of all those thousands on the walls, have I ever brought away with me."

Esau Starkenden broke into a grave smile. "Stranger still, Brother," he said, "that I should come away empty-handed, for mine and not yours was the greed that first took us on that quest."

Jacob Starkenden held up his hand. "No more of that, Esau, I beg of you," he cried. "I seem to remember we agreed never to refer to the subject again."

"We had agreed," replied Esau. "But I am afraid I shall break the agreement now and again, if only to punish myself. And after all, ought we not to be thankful that we *can* refer to the subject without fear? Is it not rather a glorious assurance to us that the past is past?"

"Hear, hear!" put in Professor Winslow heartily. "As for the gems, let us give credit where it is due. I think we owe Crayton a vote of thanks for never letting *his* avarice go to sleep, even in his darkest hour."

"You flatter me there, Professor," I laughed. "My avarice was very much obscured by sheer funk at about the time we picked up those gems. It wasn't even my idea to pick them up. Hope suggested it."

"Hope!"

"Yes, gentlemen, Hope. And he's a man who, though he's never done anything but wander the globe in search of a fortune, hasn't a speck of avarice in his whole makeup."

"How did he come to remember the eyestones, then?" demanded the professor drily.

"In a very simple way. While we were exploring the hall where those gems were stored we picked up a handful to improve the light of our lamp. Then the lamp went out. We were a tidy distance from our quarters, but we had marked the wall of the caves to show us the way back if necessary, and now wanted something to see the marks by. Hope told me to take another handful of eyestones, and we found they served the purpose well enough. When we got back to our cell we distributed the gems about our pockets because we wanted to conceal the fact that we'd tried to escape, and that seemed the best place to hide them. And I think we can both honestly say that from then forward we gave the things precious little thought."

"In that case you are acquitted of avarice, Crayton," said the professor, "but convicted of most inhuman good luck, both on the part of yourself and your confederates. It ought to make a very handsome pile for you all."

"Us all," corrected Esau Starkenden.

Winslow stared at him with unfeigned surprise. "You mean you wish to give away your hard-earned wealth to me, Starkenden?" he cried.

"It is not mine to give, Professor. You simply take your share with the rest of us. And your share will be one sixth of the twenty-nine eyestones brought away by Hope and Crayton and the one I took from Ducros on our way up that river—thirty in all."

Winslow drummed his fingers on the table. "Honestly, Starkenden," he said, "I didn't expect more than my bare freedom."

"I didn't expect even that, myself, Professor," remarked Jacob Starkenden. "And I have to thank you for it."

"Well, you are all very good to me," said Winslow at last, smiling uneasily, "and I suppose it would be ungracious in me to demur. What is my fortune going to amount to?"

Esau Starkenden leaned forward with a more business-like air, and sank his voice lower. "That is a thing I must go into before we break up," he said. "I am moving with the utmost caution, of course—particularly as you two seem determined to visit that region again. But the matter has to be tackled sooner or later, so today I made a beginning. I approached Hyam, the dealer of this port, placed him under a pledge of secrecy, and showed him Simbok's eyestone—for that is the one we must realise on first, or Simbok will think we have failed him. Hyam was greatly impressed. After a lengthy examination he valued that one stone at a minimum figure of a hundred thousand yen—though he admitted it might fetch ten times as much if its fame were known to the jewel-fancying world. That is ten thousand pounds sterling, Professor, for one eyestone. Your share will be five times as much, or fifty thousand—perhaps a lot more. And *now* do you still persist in making this most foolhardy expedition?"

"I was never more determined on anything in my life," replied the professor cheerfully.

"Very well. You shall receive your portion as soon as the stones are sold—Jacob will attend to that, and also to the disposal of Simbok's fortune. Hyam has given me a letter of introduction to Van Zyl, of Amsterdam, whom he represents in this part of the world. I shall seek out Van Zyl as soon as I reach Europe, and have the gems cut and valued and realised on."

"HOW about Marah?" put in Jacob Starkenden. "Surely she will want to keep back one of the stones for her own adornment?"

"I have asked her, but she is content to wait for two years, when the original eyestones passes to her according to the entail."

"Of course. I had forgotten. Well, there you are, Professor. You are a rich man now. Perhaps you will be richer before many months are past."

"In fact," said the professor with a laugh, "I may be opulent enough to found a chair in my old University—an ambition I had long cherished. No, Starkenden, it was facts I first went to those caves to unearth. Facts are more precious to me even than eyestones. I gained a great store on my first visit, but there are many more I still want, and it is to get them that I am going south now. When I come back with my facts and give them to the world, the world should be grateful to me. I shall have thrown light on one of the most baffling mysteries with which the ethnologist is at present confronted."

"What mystery is that, Professor?" I inquired a little blankly.

"The mystery of the race of Khmer," he replied. "A Caucasic race, gentlemen, isolated in that southeastern corner of Asia, surrounded for thousands of miles in every direction by peoples of indubitably different stock. The ancient Khmer-dom have so far defied mankind to place and account for. It was to discover something about them that I originally scoured those regions. Now I am going again. I vaguely remember that in the innermost chambers of the caves there were not only undefiled sculptures but inscriptions. And if it costs me every cent I possess I will have those inscriptions. They may be of unique value—perhaps even enable me to put together a complete history of the Khmer race."

"You are convinced the caves were originally the work of the Khmer?" inquired Esau Starkenden.

"Hope and Crayton will tell you of the strange circumstances under which they heard that theory from me. I outlined it in my sleep, I believe—at any rate subconsciously. So far as I can surmise, the matter must have strongly engaged my mind when I first saw the interior of the caves and had not yet been drugged. Later on, when I began to recover my reason through the kindliness of Hope and Crayton, that overlaid train of thought apparently burst through to the surface again. The theory I then propounded I still adhere to, now that I have so completely recovered my faculties."

"Do you remember anything yet of your capture by the savages, Professor?"

"A little, and more is coming back to me day by day. It was eighteen years ago that I first visited those caves, gentlemen. I was accompanied by one white man, the late George Tampion, of San Francisco, who was my assisant on that expedition, and a small band of native bearers. I believe Tampion was killed immediately—he was not the man to allow himself to be taken alive—and that our natives all went to the White Tiger one by one. But of the period following my arrival I still have only the very vaguest impressions. I cannot even locate the time when I was first taken to the chamber of the Undying One, or why I was taken there—less still why my presence in the caves was always kept hidden from you, Jacob."

"I cannot fathom it myself," replied Jacob Starkenden, "unless that fiend was afraid I might rebel against his domination if I knew there was a man of my own race immured in the caves. It seems that he could not predict exactly how long the effect of his drugs would hold."

"Ah, the point hadn't occurred to me. Well, we may gather some hint towards the solution of that riddle, too, if all goes well. And many others. Leaving out the identity of that 'Unknown God' who came to the caves in ages gone by, the Undying One and his priestess are still an utter mystery to me. How had those two beings prolonged life so enormously beyond the natural span? Was there actually a 'Bread of Immortality' as well as a 'Wine of Oblivion'? We know at least that the latter substance was no myth. With luck and a strong party of natives for excavation purposes we may even obtain a vial of the Wine intact. And if we do, I fancy that one vial is going to upheave the world's ideas on pharmacy very severely."

"We will certainly engage a strong body of natives, Professor, and we will take the precaution of arming them. After all, what if some dwarfs survived the explosion?"

AFTER Ducros' death and the great explosion, from which we escaped unhurt, though several huge masses of rock came hurling down the slants not far from us—we hastened southward, keeping roughly parallel with the course of the river. It was an ordeal that even now gives me qualms to remember, for we were without food of any sort, the rains broke afresh and fell on our half-clad bodies in solid sheets of water, and that mountainside, which I fancy we must have been the first human beings to cross, was rugged and perilous in the extreme.

When at last we reached the gap in the cliff and looked over its dizzy edge we saw that the whole cañon was full of water to a great depth, the falls pouring out like a hundred burst mains. Even had we been able to reach the secret stairway we could not have used it, for that high-poised lake below the cliffs had now overflowed in all directions, and the rapids southward of it were a huge expanse of boiling foam.

We worked several miles to the east until we entered a region where the great limestone range subsided; thence, with unheard-of difficulty and many hair-breadth escapes, scrambled down into the plains, skirted the vast swamp, and at last found a jungle village where we could obtain food and shelter. Here we made a long halt. For over a week Winslow lay unconscious, clinging to life by a bare thread, and Marah Starkenden was in little better case.

When eventually we were fit to travel again we built litters for Marah and Winslow engaged a part of the villagers to carry them, and struck out for the coast. Thanks to Simbok's expert guidance we managed to strike it at an unfrequented point. He then tramped alone into the nearest port—which was that same port of Vinh where the Starkendens had begun their first expedition—chartered a sea-going junk for us, brought the vessel alongshore at dusk, and saw us safely on board. Simbok was by this time fast recovering his wonted appearance. He had presented a truly horrible spectacle at the beginning of the march, but when once we reached vegetation again, he plastered his body from head to foot with herbal remedies known only to himself, and healed his burns and wounds in a few days.

Simbok was now anxious to return inland and take possession of his newly inherited kingdom before the salutary effects of Ducros' firm rule should have given place to anarchy. We therefore bade goodbye to him, it being arranged that as soon as we had realised on his eyestone we would find means of depositing the proceeds in Simbok's name in a French bank on the coast.

For our part, we got away to sea and sailed in that junk the whole way to Canton. It was a long, tedious trip and a rough manner of life, but it at least enabled us to do what we particularly wanted to do just now—avoid collision with the French authorities. And from Canton we took steamer to Yokohama direct. Here again we were in luck.

We found that the Hulwórthys had recently left for Europe, that the servant Yoshio had never reappeared, and that police and public alike seemed by this time to have written off the abduction of Marah Starkenden as an unsolved mystery.

We had taken the precaution, however, of preparing a defense for Jacob Starkenden should he ever be charged with the *Tónquinaise* piracy.

"Never fear, my dear Jacob," said the professor gently. "On one point I am quite satisfied, and I think the four of us could go into the witness box and convince any court of it too—there is no moral responsibility attaching to you for the way you acted. From the day you were given those

extraordinary drugs you were certainly not in your right mind."

"I must have been out of my mind many years, at that rate," replied Jacob Starkenden gravely. "It was certainly very early in my imprisonment that I took the drugs. My first clear recollection is seeing the Undying One and the Unaging One together. Yet here is the amazing thing—so completely had I then forgotten my past that I did not realize how like me in face that woman was.

"Afterwards my memory gradually returned to me, but never my will-power. All through the interminable years that followed I was completely under the domination of that fiend. I had a gnawing desire to escape, yet I knew that without the Undying One's consent I could not stir a foot to do so. And he, for some reason I cannot fathom, had decided I was to remain."

"Perhaps I can suggest a reason," said Winslow. "Supposing the Undying One believed that that 'Unknown God' of the past would some day return to the caves, or that if the 'Unknown God' were really a man, his descendant would come? Suppose that when I arrived the Undying One at first suspected *I* was a descendant of the 'Unknown God,' and allowed me to wander freely about the caves as you were allowed, only confining me to a cell after you came, Jacob, with your so much closer resemblance to the image of the 'Unknown God'? Wouldn't that explain why you never saw me through all those years?"

"It is possible. But why should he have kept me?"

"Ah, there we get into a realm of very shadowy speculation. Suppose that 'Unknown God' had committed an act of sacrilege, then fled away without the Undying One's consent, and suppose the Undying One had nursed through the centuries his thirst for vengeance upon the 'Unknown God' or his descendants?"

A LIGHT dawned in Jacob Starkenden's face, which had remained curiously pale throughout all our journeyings.

"He offered me my freedom if I brought to the caves a priestess who could take the place of the Unaging One who had died."

"Not only was I mad," he continued after a moment or two, "but endowed with the unearthly cunning of that devil, my master. You already know how I found Ducros in the jungle. I talked to him—with the subtle perversion that can make an evil tale sound just and righteous—and Ducros, shrewd man and good fellow though he was, couldn't see the devilry of it. You, Esau, know how the trap was baited for you, how I arrived here in Yokohama to see that it worked and to carry out my side of that hellish bargain with the Undying One.

"But what happened the day after you left for Kobe I have never told you. Early in the morning I went secretly to the Hulworthys' house and laid my plans with the boy Yoshio, who had been in my pay for weeks past. He was to wait till Marah was alone in the house, then introduce a certain drug into the first food or drink she took, and signal to me immediately he had done so. Everything played into our hands. Hulworthy left for his office at ten, Mrs. Hulworthy went out a few minutes later. Marah was breakfasting late by herself. The signal from Yoshio came. I presented myself at the front door and was soon alone with Marah.

"Well, I had known what to expect from the Wine of Forgetting, yet even I was amazed to find how swiftly it had worked. Marah looked dazed and sleepy, but not in the least alarmed. I knew she had seen me through the window of this house the night before and been badly frightened, but she had forgotten that now, and practically everything else.

"Within ten minutes, by careful talk and leading questions, I discovered she had no idea or where she was. I at once began to supply her blank mind with the things I wanted her to believe. I spoke of myself as her father, that house as ours, and mentioned that our train would soon be leaving for the pleasure trip down south that we had planned.

"Marah accompanied me to the station without the least demur, and I knew she was completely in my power. That dazed air soon left her, she behaved like a happy child going away on a holiday, and what with the likeness between her and me, and the passport I had already forged—Marah of course had her own—I got clean through to Hongkong without arousing anybody's suspicion.

"I had learned at Kobe that I was being pursued. Between there and Hongkong, therefore, I carefully primed Marah with what she was to say in case we were arrested, and when we went before the chief of police together she bore me out well enough. The chief of police offered me the alternative of being arrested or depositing a thousand dollars as security not to leave port yet. I chose the bail, well knowing

that I could afford to jump it. I had plenty of money.

"Of the two eyestones I brought from the caves, the rough one was now with Ducros, and on my way northward through Kobe I had persuaded a dealer to risk ten thousand yen on the other—though he, like Hyam, had never seen such a gem before. But now that I was jumping bail, I knew I must get beyond reach of the law, and I took steps to do so. And the way I handled that affair would afford another proof, if another were wanted, that I was not in my right mind. All fear and hesitation had left me—I had the daring of a life-long criminal. I went straight down into the lowest quarter of Hongkong, and got into touch with a gang of ruffians who were about to ship as seamen on the *Tonquinaise*, the next vessel leaving for the French coast.

"Every one of those fellows had committed piracy and murder before, I imagine—they certainly behaved like practised hands. I had merely bribed them to seize the ship, turn her out of her course to my rendezvous and leave her stranded, with the crew and passengers bound, but they went further. They looted the vessel, seized a passing junk, and sank the *Tonquinaise* beyond sight of land.

"I now made for my rendezvous with Ducros. He managed his half of the plot with great skill, and brought you up country close behind me—but never too close. I had arrived myself three nights before. My greatest difficulty, I anticipated, would be in getting Marah into the caves, but there I had reckoned without the Undying One. That fiend was in some way aware of the exact time I should arrive, and he had prepared for my arrival. When I went ahead alone to scout, I found all the guards near the entrance to the caves lying still—drugged. I passed on into the inmost chambers, took one of those long gauzy robes and veils, rolled them up small under my tunic, and returned to the litter. Marah was asleep in it. My natives had one and all fled.

"Fled," he repeated, in answer to our sudden look of surprise. "Apparently they scuttled back down the river and through the cliff stair, and went home by a route east of the rapids. Otherwise you would possibly have met them, or at least sighted them. So their murder at least is not on my soul. Only one native had been killed by me—the one whose skeleton you found at the foot of the cliffs.

"When that shot was fired, Marah was already at the top with the litter-bearers who had carried her up, and I believe she never knew what actually had happened, which was this. When I got to the head of the stairs with that litter and the first four bearers, I noticed that the other four—I had eight altogether—had not followed. I called to them, but there was no answer. I then returned down the stair to see what was amiss.

"I could not afford to let them go yet, for as you know, there were still many miles of soft sand to cover with that litter, and I wished to complete the journey as quickly as possible—I expected by this time you would have drawn close, and Ducros might not be able to hold you back.

"Hardly had I emerged from the stair when the four of them rushed on me in a way there was no mistaking. I saw what they were at. They had plotted to desert, but intended to kill and rob me first, and were waiting at the foot of the stairs in the hope that I should come down to look for them alone. I broke away, shot the nearest, and threatened to shoot the rest if they did not go ahead of me up those stairs at once. I had to watch them very closely for the remainder of the journey, and it was only because I had no choice that I left Marah with them at the end.

"However, there was no need for alarm. Marah had no valuables on her, and by that time the bearers could have had little thought of robbery left in them. They had grown more and more terrified as we advanced up the river, and I have no doubt they ran as soon as my back was turned. They certainly never fell into the hands of the Ktawrh. Those natives that went to the last sacrifice had been seized by the dwarfs in their forays long ago. There were only five of them—as perhaps you noticed—and my bearers that finally deserted were seven in number.

"I WOKE Marah, got her out of the litter, and gave her the long robe and veil to put on over her travelling dress. She obeyed me mechanically—she seemed half asleep still. I buried the litter deep in the sand, with her sun helmet and spare clothes, and we walked on together, entered the caves, and passed clean through into the inner chambers without being seen by more than half a dozen of the Ktawrh. These fell on their faces, but were not suspicious. Or so I thought then. The Undying One had give out that his priestess was gone on a journey and that when

(Continued on page 129)

MASTERS of FANTASY

Ray Bradbury—THE OCTOBER MAN—Born 22 August 1920

What St. Nick is to the Yule, Raymond Douglas Bradbury is to the Hallowe'en school. He is the barker at the "Dark Carnival", the offspring of "The Dead Man", the victim of "Fever Dream", the guest of honor at "Home-coming". The greatest original writer the fantasy field has produced in modern times, Bradbury has won international recognition with his reprintings in the O. Henry Memorial Awards and Best American Short Stories. His works have been dramatized on the radio and translated into Spanish.

As a boy he was a Burroughs and Buck Rogers fan and published his own fan magazine; as an adult he prefers Ambrose Bierce, Honore de Balzac, Steinbeck and Hemingway. He is a frequent visitor at the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society.

His concepts of Mars are curiously his own, and he deals deftly with Death holidaying amidst humanity. His thread is smoothest silk when he spins tales of baroque babies for gothic grownups. He has authored 100 gems of fantasy, gems blood-red and crystal clear, diamond sharp and hypnotic as a cat's-eye. A youth with the stature of an Old Master, Bradbury is the fair-haired boy of fantasy.

(Continued from page 6)

of the best, carrying the names of Merritt, Hall, England, Starzl, and Serviss. I noticed the title, "Conquest of the Moon Pool", and, expecting a rocket-ship story, hastily plunked a nickel for the coverless magazine. I was not far immersed in it when I decided it was no rocket story, and seemed quite complex for a story in a mag with six others! I turned to the end and was horrified to find there were five more parts! It took a long time to gather them and I read them in a mixed order—with no less enjoyment.

I sometimes wonder whether I would find the same simple and whole enjoyment in them were I to read them for the first time now, when I am also ten years older. Would I laugh or feel self-conscious when Henry Wendel speaks of the Nervina as a "girl of the moon-beams" and she sadly asks him to give up the ring for "no man may wear it"? I do not think so; I hope not.

Oh, so many other pleasant voyages in fantasy these ten years. Out to the rotted ship and its dread owner, with the blood-red casket, in "Claimed". Awakening from a millenium of sleep with Beatrice and Allen. Off to Venus with Myles Cabot. In the Land of the Mirage with immortal Lur, and her white wolves . . . and the Lake of Ghosts, ever-sparkling and quiet with its memories. Into an atom of gold for a lovely princess! And surely the most fantastic story ever written, that of living and evolving metal, the great "Metal Monster" of A. Merritt.

And—the transition in 1943. How I fumed and ranted, refusing to accept the inevitable. "Cave-man stuff! Perpetual endings of the world! Bah!" I cursed. But I look back, and was it so bad after all? For a few interminable pieces, whose names I shall not mention, we had such great novels as the Hodgsons, "Three Go Back," Haggard, "The Lost Continent", and the greatest, "The Man Who Was Thursday"! And with them—Dunsany, Chambers, Machen, Blackwood, C. L. Moore—

But the pendulum swung back, and the great fantasies of *Argosy* were restored to us in FN, which can never be thought of other than as a part of F.F.M. Better yet, the Munseyarns again were finding their way into F.F.M. For the new readers, it meant the famous marvels of fantasy were back. And again, I wonder whether these newer, younger readers are getting the same enjoyment out of the stories that we did (if I may not sound too paternal!) I'm afraid Merritt left the explanations of the few scientific gadgets he employed to those who were so literal-minded as to demand explanations. And might not the youngsters expect a few words from Austin Hall on the latest hyper-dimensional theories of Professor Holcomb instead of his dramatic "Tomorrow I shall tear away the veil of the occult!"?

"Well, it is certainly a non-fantastic world, and perhaps it is not as easy any more to "sail down the river of a million perils" and "earn a more than vicarious thrill". Still, we have the pleasant conjecture—escape, if you will—offered in the pages of our mag.

The new decade should offer the same enjoyment. Certainly F.N.'s "Between Worlds" will offer pleasure to those who enjoy a pleasant story, simply told. The inter-planetary travel may not be in the vein so successfully traveled by Dr. E. E. Smith and others, but it has a charm that no rocket ship has. And, the new decade must bring back to us the Polaris sequels; "The Man Who Mastered Time"; the sequels to "On the Brink of 2000" (a Jan. 1940 story, still waiting for its sequels! For shame!) "Treasures of Tantalus" and "After a Million Years." There are more by Rousseau, Farley, Zagat, Cummings, England, Serviss, Robbins, F. Stevens, and others in the roll-call of the great names.

Yes, it should be a grand second decade, and, although I could write volumes more, I'll close now, and save them for the twentieth year! And, as I used to say long ago, for that "great big, fat weekly *Famous Fantastic Mysteries!!*"

All the best wishes for this next decade from an old complainer who has grown mellow.

BEN INDICK.

1551 Worthington St.,
Columbus 1,
Ohio.

Concerns "Purple Cloud"

Whatever swayed you to make use of M. P. Shiel's "The Purple Cloud", is to be lauded!

Even in this rather noisy and crowded and generally tempestuous hotel lobby, where I am a clerk, I was able to become at times completely absorbed in this most wonderful tale.

A great deal of the writing style is beautiful! For instance, one phrase, typical of so many, I quote "and such an ague that for a long while my wandering finger tips, all ataxic with agitation, eluded every delicate effort which I made, and I could nothing do." So many such phrases, all of them delightful! The high point was reached in the profuse description of Constantinople. Or was it so when Jeffson was idling awhile on an island as described in the upper left column of page 67? Just what I would do!

The utter loneliness was well brought out. The natural reaction of a person in such circumstances, to burst in all doors, to burn, to do everything once forbidden by millions of other people, and the result of semi-madness, and hate of fate for leaving one alone with the whole world.

I noted a similarity between the evident "symbolism" found here and there, (especially while Jeffson talked with Eve) and that found in the conversations of the two leading characters in a book entitled "My First Three-Thousand Years". The character in this much like Jeffson, didn't discover the second leading character until the story was well advanced.

As to the Lawrence cover and illos, I must say that he is holding his own. But the cover is the sort which was made to order for the "casual reader" the "sampler" and the curious. I asked one man I know if he could guess what kind of fiction I was reading, simply by judging from the cover. He guessed it was a love novel. The background makes many think it is

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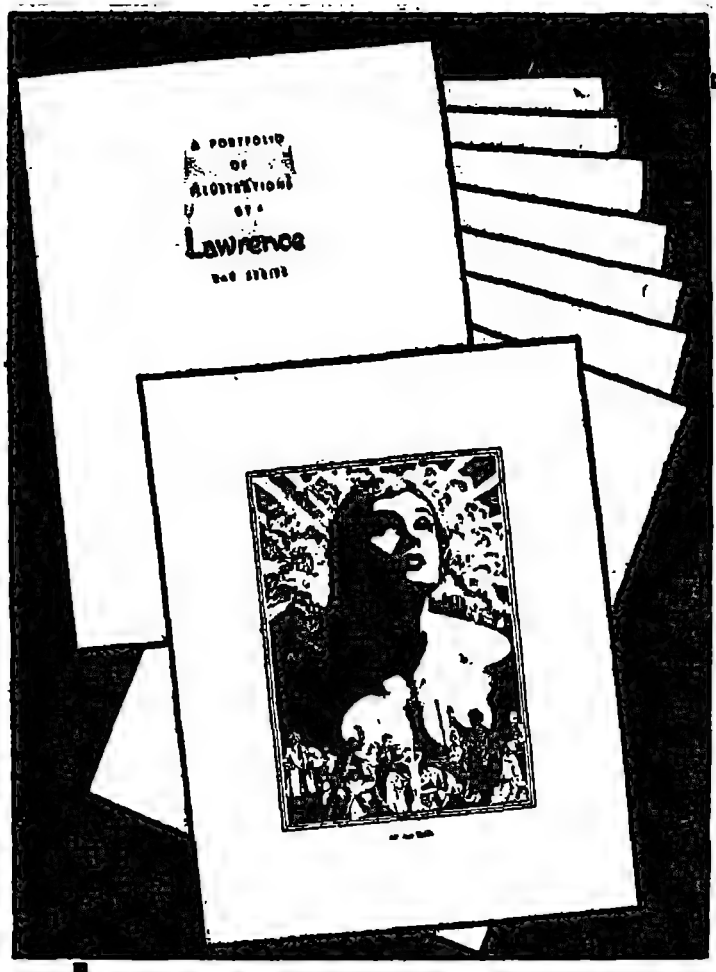

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(Continued from page 120)

an up-to-date "atomic doom" tale, no doubt. There is a reason behind such obvious mistakes. Why not a cover without movie stars for leading rôles on them? No doubt someone will see some resemblance to leading film personages on this June cover! And if Jeffson was 46 when he finally tumbled, and Eve about 20, then this cover depicts Jeffson at about fifteen or twenty years too young!

Perhaps Lawrence should have used Spencer Tracy as the model!

Lord Dunsany looks like H. G. Wells! "Mirror Maze" not so good.

Let's hear from Margaret McIntyre.

BOB BARNETT.

1107 Lyon St.
Carthage, Mo.

Going to the Capicon?

At the Seventh World Science-Fiction Convention to be held in Cincinnati over Labor Day week-end this year, the Washington Science-Fiction Association has voted to put in a bid for Washington, D. C. as the site for the Eighth Convention to be held in 1950. Our motto: Capicon Will Be Nifty In Nineteen-Fifty!

Thus far, considerable enthusiasm for this proposal has been worked up among the fans and pros. Among the fans boosting for Washington in fifty are Dave MacInnes (Editor of *Necromancer*); W. Leslie Hudson (Secretary-Treasurer of NFFF); and Roy W. Loan, Jr. (Editor of *The Science-Fiction Bookman*).

We have tentative commitments from Capt. James A. Saunders (USN Retired), Trustee of the Institute of General Semantics, from author George O. Smith, from rocket expert Willy Ley, and from fantasy author Seabury Quinn for talks. Pioneer publisher Hugo Gernsback has also tentatively agreed to talk before the Eighth World S-F Convention, if held in Washington, D. C. In addition, Nelson S. Bond said that he would arrange for a film showing of one of his stories. E. E. Smith has written that he would be heartily in favor of holding the '50 Convention in Washington over Labor Day Week-end.

LOUIS E. GARNER, JR.,
President, W.S-F.A.

(Home Address):
310 East Mason Ave.,
Alexandria, Virginia.

High Praise for "Mirror Maze"

It is indeed seldom that any story moves me to the point of writing a letter to the editor after reading fantasy and science fiction steadily since Gernsback first wrote and sponsored the *mode moderne* in *Science and Invention* and *Amazing Stories* many more years ago than I care to recollect at this year of 1949 A.D.

Twenty-five years gone down the road, never again to be seen in this incarnation— Gad, what a wasted life spent reading the guff and hacked-out fillers that pass for imaginative fiction! The unequivocal trash that makes any literate colleagues raise their eyebrows and noses when the subject comes up . . but that is when doctors disagree.

Such fantasy as Mullen's "Mirror Maze" gives me a feeling that all is not yet lost and that there are still solid meaty grains of worth among all the monstrous mountains of chaff that I have winnowed and wallowed through, dimly hoping to find some refreshing concept, something a bit new, that would relieve the tedium of such ghastly dullness.

Let us have more of Mullen and let us hope some of the older established writers will take heed of this lone voice calling down on their heads the twin curse of Lethe and Morpheus, both of whom have assailed me this long time through many of their stories.

DR. ALFRED D. KLEYHAUER.

1511 Welton St.,
Denver 2,
Colorado.

Summing Up 1949

It has been quite some time since I have written to you concerning my humble opinions about *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* and I find that three issues have piled up on me. So here I go, starting with the February issue.

Cover: Typical good Lawrence.

Novels: "Angel Island" was a fair story. One that belongs in the class of stories where fantasy plays a very minor part, making it just barely suitable for publication in F.F.M.

Jack London's "Scarlet Plague" is a different matter. A very popular and well-known end-of-civilization-as-we-call-it yarn.

Inside pics were fair by Lawrence and appropriate by the welcome Leydenfrost.

Total for Feb. Just barely passing.

The April issue is very much better. In fact, the best one so far this year. The Lawrence cover, symbolic as always, was very good. For a while there, I thought we were to have pretty cover girls all year.

The novel is the best so far this year. I had counted upon the name, Edison Marshall, to give me good reading and that was exactly the way it turned out. This story is somewhat similar to previous lost-Stone-age stories and carried on the tradition very well. No tiring and dry pages in this novel. The reflections of both Weismann and Belgrade which took up much space in the middle of some of the great scenes did not detract from the action as such has in other novels. It added a great deal. Can we be counting on more Marshall novels in the future?

I was very pleased to see "Black Butterflies" in F.F.M. for more than one reason. It was surprising to see a *Munsey yarn in F.F.M.!* It was also a requested story among others by Mason, in F.N. And finally, it was a pleasing story. Enjoyable to read. Can we expect more stories by Mason? "Red Tree Frogs" for instance?

The inside illustrations were pretty good. Finlay was at his best in the "Black Butterflies" illustrations.

All in all, this was a most satisfactory issue.

And finally I come up to date with the June F.F.M.

It looks as if we have lost our cover girl this time. At least after the fashion of the first two 1949 F.F.M.s. But, as usual, this is a rather well done symbolic cover after the manner of all Lawrence covers.

"The Purple Cloud" is the first major work that I have read by M.P. Shiel. It left me with mixed feelings. The greater portion of the novel displays his talent to a great extent but I really didn't gain too much pleasure from the story. The latter part concerning the man's growing love for the girl was done quite well, but there is a disturbing note to the whole story. I do admit, though, that Shiel did weave a very convincing spell and did make the world seem very, very empty and desolate all right. I also noticed that Shiel puts a lot of faith in the ability of food-stuffs! After over seventeen years, I am sure that the food would have perished!

Well, there we have it. A much requested novel. It rates second to "DIAN" so far, on the yearly rating. I believe the price of the magazine was well worth paying, though.

Mullen's short story was good but that feeling of annoyance over-lapped and spoiled this story for me, too. However, I was glad to see him represented in F.F.M. He is definitely an up-and-coming author.

As always, the Masters of Fantasy page is an asset to the magazine. I still wish there could be two pages devoted to this.

Lawrence's illustrations were fair and Leydenfrost's pic for the short was ideal for the mood and setting. I am very glad to see his work again.

Before I forget, let me add a belated Happy Anniversary to you and F.F.M. Ten years of continued publication of the *best* of Fantasy (although I fear there have been slight dips at times!).

I might take issue with Gordon Stoeckler about the business of Burroughs. All of ERB's famous Mars and Venus series books are easily available in book form. I would venture to say that the Tarzan books are likewise, although I hope there is no danger of any Tarzan novels appearing in F.F.M.! Or F.N., either, for that matter. Resolved: Burroughs novels are too easily available to be considered for F.F.M.! And, at the risk of my life, a good many of these stories are somewhat juvenile for F.F.M.! There, now I have done it!

Let me again request Chambers: "Slayer of Souls" for F.F.M. It has a definite Merritt touch to it, not to mention being very good in its own right.

In closing, I will say that I regard the next novel with forebodings. It is not in the "Checklist." If you must have Mann . . now what made me say Mann? Anyway, how about Jack Mann's works? Well, as I was saying, I fear that next novel won't be very good. The other Vivian story, "City of Wonder" was somewhat of a flop.

I see this is running much longer than I had intended. But since publication in TRV is not the main reason I'm writing this, I'll continue on for a bit.

Though I don't remember anyone mentioning it, surely someone must have realized that in recent years you have switched to mostly new stories as fillers instead of reprinting from books of shorts by the old masters. How come thus? Doesn't anybody like Dunsany any more? Or prefer the short work of Bram Stoker? What is wrong with publishing some of John Collier's short stories? I don't mean to imply that I don't like the short stories we have been given, but the new work will easily fit into *Super Science* and, if revived, *Astonishing*.

Concerning inside illustrations. It looks as if both Lawrence and Finlay have been worn out or something. Finlay's only good post-war work has been appearing in *Fantastic Novels*. So, as you have partly done, why not try a few new, varied artists? Leydenfrost is very adequate in his present status. Now, how about getting Clyne back once in a while? and Bok would be welcome. He is the only good artist in S.S.S. at the present. And for my nomination as the artist to replace Finlay, have you seen any of the drawings of D. Bruce Berry? If not, you don't know what you are missing! Also, it wouldn't hurt to look over the ten drawings by fantasy artists in the *Fantasy Artisans Portfolio* (which is available from the S, F & SF Amateur Press at P. O. Box 696, Kings Park, L. I., New York). You'll be surprised at how well these fellows can draw!

And this is the end of the longest letter I've ever dumped into the lap of F.F.M.'s letter editor! *After this, I won't wait* until there is so much to talk about!

ED COX.

4 Spring Street,
Lubec,
Maine.

Editor's Note: We shall have another Marshall story in the next issue. There will be stories by Mason in F.N. "Red Tree Frogs" will be in F.F.M. Yes—E. Charles Vivian also writes under the name of Jack Mann. Many readers liked "The City of Wonder." The original title of "Valley of Silent Men" was "Fields of Sleep."

New Kind of Fan Club

If you have a record of "I Can't Begin To Tell You" handy, put it on your player for background music. It isn't quite accurate, since I *am* going to make a stab at telling you how much I appreciate several things, but it sets the mood.

Firstly, a great reprint by a great author—with superb illustrations. Thankee kindly.

Secondly, a story by a new author. Altho Stan slipped up once or twice, and left a thread dangling in the middle, it was still a good story—and important, because it shows your willingness to help new authors that can show that they merit assistance. Congratulations.

Thirdly, you published my letter. Ah, kind editor! It got pleasing results, too. Now, I have another one that I want published—a *Notice to owners of wire recorders:* Particularly *clubs* that own or have access to a recorder, but *anyone* having one available is invited to join our group. Altho we are already under way, we have not definitely decided on a name—for the nonce, it will be re-

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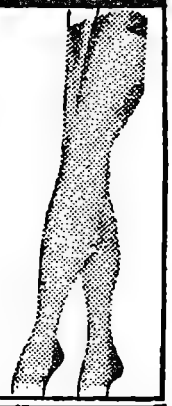

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ferred to us FFSP—Fan Federation for Sound Productions. The point of the whole thing is WIREZ, the club organ. The magazine of the future. The first wirezine (wirzen to members) containing space skits, occasional poems, space songs (usually parodies) fannews, and other features. That's only the first fifteen or so minutes.

After that, the different members put things of their own in—choice bits of news that they might have, perhaps reviews on current books—or rare books they may be lucky enough to own—or anything that pops into their minds. Maybe just an introduction of themselves to the other members, to help everyone get acquainted. Everyone eligible please get in touch with me now if not sooner.

Thanx for the space (I hope.) To keep from using too much of it, I'll close, with this reminder: Write

SHELBY VICK.

Box 493,
Lynn Haven, Fla.

Pleased New Reader

I have been reading your magazine along with *Fantastic Novels* for over a year now and just wanted to say that I've enjoyed every copy I have. Your magazines were my introduction to fantastic literature and I'm a fan for life now. Since I am not an old and tired reader I can't offer any suggestions for the future just yet, but will do so later on. In the meantime I'll keep looking forward to each issue for a thoroughly entertaining evening.

Keep up the good work.

MISS JEAN PEDROLI.

86 Jasper Ave.
Teaneck, N. J.

Thanks for "Purple Cloud"

Thank you for printing Shiel's "Purple Cloud". I enjoyed it very much.

Now that this preoccupation with Merritt is over (I hope!) you may have room for stories by some other authors. Not that I don't like his stories—on the contrary, I like them very much. It's just that there are dozens of other authors whose works are either unobtainable or available only in high-priced editions, that deserve recognition.

For instance Edgar Rice Burroughs—there are many of his novels, such as "The Moon Maid", "The Monster Men", "Bandit of Hell's Bend", "Back to the Stone Age", or "The Lad and The Lion", which cost anywhere for $5.00 up in second-hand bookshops. Also some of his novelettes.

Other authors include Ray Cummings—"Shadow Girl", "Brigands of the Moon", etc.; Talbot Mundy—"Full Moon", "Devil's Guard", etc; Otis Kline—"Swordsman of Mars", "Outlaws of Mars" and any others of this series; Van Vogt's "Book of Ptah", "Slan", "World of A", etc; Bram Stoker's "Jewel of the Seven Stars", "Lady of the Shroud", and "Dracula's Guest" Other stories which to me at least,

would be welcome are Harbou's "Metropolis" and Taine's "Green Fire". I think those will suffice for now.

For those readers of F.F.M. who are philatelists, I have back issues of *Stamps Magazine* which I will trade for back issues of any fantastic or science-fiction magazine, at a ratio of 4-1 (four *Stamps* for one S.T.F. mag; I will also sell these at 2/15c). I also have "Out of the Silent Planet" and "Face in the Abyss" for sale or trade, (pocket books).

I have been reading F.F.M. and F.N. for only a few months, but I'm catching up on the back issues I missed. Both magazines are tops.

Fan-tastically,
BOB BRINEY.

561 West Western Ave.,
Muskegon, Mich.

P. S. Hope this gets printed. It'll be the first if it does!

Lawrence Has "Poet's Touch"

Well, if that isn't service with a capital S! In my letter in the April issue, I remarked, "I'd like very much to see . . . Shiel's, "The Purple Cloud" in the future." And last week I sashay into the corner drug emporium and see "The Purple Cloud" blazoned across the cover of the June number. Well, thanks!

And thanks for a good story, too. TPC, though a mite dull and boring in parts, is a fine novel in the Wellsian manner, and colorful reading. Lawrence's pix for the story were outstanding; especially the one on page 35 . . . "Alone! Alone!" The small human figure, atop the soaring cliff, with a bleak, empty sky in the background: they all combined to create the effect of loneliness. Lawrence often has the poet's touch of emotion in his work.

I think I'll try the spell again: (ahem) "I'd like to see "She," Chambers' "Maker of Moons," and Wright's "The World Below" in the future."

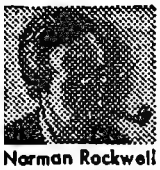
Yours . . .
LIN CARTER,
Editor, *Spaceteer.*

1734 Newark St. So.,
St. Petersburg, Fla.

A Plea to Fans

This is a plea to all S.F. fans and readers. About eight months ago I lost my home by fire. My considerable collection of S.F. mags went up in the blaze, and it was as though I had lost my right arm. I am asking any fans who have any back issues of *Amazing, F.F.M., F.N., Weird, Astounding,* or any others, no matter how ancient, to send them along.

It will have to be strictly charity, as I don't have any old mags to trade and it is going to take every cent I can rake up to put a roof over my head. I'll certainly appreciate all donations. And any doubles I get will be sent to other fans requesting back issues.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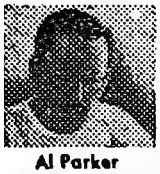
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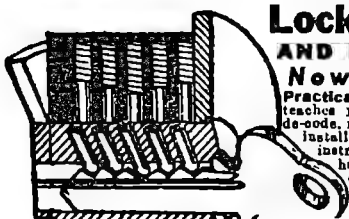

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"Nordenholt's Million" was wonderful! It will have a prominent place in my new collection. I also liked "The Lion's Way". Some of it was reminiscent of "Tarzan", but with a lot of good new stuff added. "Dian of the Lost Land" was also very good in the April 1949 ish. Altogether, you have a swell magazine.

Fantastically Yours,
JOHN C. BENZ.

571 C Eagle Ave.,
Alamenda, Calif.

N. Z. Talking

If any U. S. collector wants to get hold of some back issues of "Unknown Worlds" stories, I have a few of the British edition available for trading. They are quarterlies; and reprint stories from the defunct America edition. Write and tell me what F.F.M. or science-fiction magazines you have available. (Send air mail!)

U. S. Fantasy and S.F. magazines are about unobtainable here, and subscriptions are almost impossible to obtain on account of England's (and therefore New Zealand's) dollar shortage.

I have only seen a few copies of F.F.M. but I think it is an excellent magazine.

Fan-atically yours,
FRANK A. COULTER.

Slocks Rd, Awapuni,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand.

Four Fans

Why haven't we been informed of this subscription business. We've heard nothing and after all the time we've spent looking from one newsdealer to another every month; now we read in F.F.M., June, that Mrs. C. W. Vallette is renewing her sub.

By the way, don't girls read your mags? (I introduced my husband to them) or maybe they just don't write as good letters, eh?

4 Avid "Fans"—
PATRICIA JONES
CPL. JAMES JONES,
FRANCES RAND,
PFC. DOC RAND.

1321 Basey St.,
Fayetteville, N. Y.
& Fort Bragg, N. C.

Editor's Note: Subscription prices appear on the contents page. We'll be glad to have yours. There are many feminine fans and they often have their letters included here.

Faithful to F.F.M.

Yes, I'm another F.F.M. fan. For a long time I used to go into a mag stand and pick up any weird or fantastic mag that took my eye until one day I suddenly realized at certain times I'd get a mag that had unusual and very interesting stories that had a terrific appeal to me. Most of these stories were based on true

facts but put into different times and places to give them the unusual appeal.

Finally, I discovered there was only *one* book in all the selections in any magazine stand that was different. Now I pass up all the others and wait so very impatiently for my F.F.M. I also enjoy the Readers' Viewpoint even though I don't always agree with them. "Angel Island" was beautiful but sad; in my opinion it proves that for us women to get anything we want out of life we give away some of ourselves to receive it. "Purple Cloud" was very good material but too drawn out and dull over too long a period. Eagerly waiting for the new issue of F.F.M.

DOROTHY DREW.

Rt. 4, Box 98,
Tulare, Calif.

No Shiel Man

Just a note to let you know how thoroughly I disliked the feature story in the June issue of F.F.M.

"The Purple Cloud" by M. P. Shiel, was the sloppiest, most long-winded, most tedious, boring 102 pages of trash I have ever waded through. As F.F.M. usually had fairly good stories; this very worthless story was an unpleasant surprise.

DONALD L. FOX.

208 N. Seventh,
Bicknell, Ind.

Liked June Issue

"The Purple Cloud" was unusual. I enjoyed the tale throughout. M. P. Shiel sure is one of the world's most famous writers of fantasy. More please.

"Mirror Maze" is one of the best shorts you've published in some time.

The Readers' department was short but good.

JAMES W. AYERS.

609 1st St.
Attalla, Ala.

Wants "The Doomsman"

Have noticed that most of your recent offerings have featured the theme of civilization gone to pot. With the notable exception of M. P. Shiel's "Purple Cloud", these have little to recommend them. The plots are hackneyed and the writing styles are mediocre.

If you are seriously interested in giving your reading public a break, then give them Sutphen's superb novel "The Doomsman", a magnificently written piece, and one of the most thrilling books I have ever read. It is along the "decayed civilization" line, but in my estimation it stands alone.

Please do not ever muck up your magazine with science-fiction, reams of which is procurable elsewhere.

J. D. DONNER.

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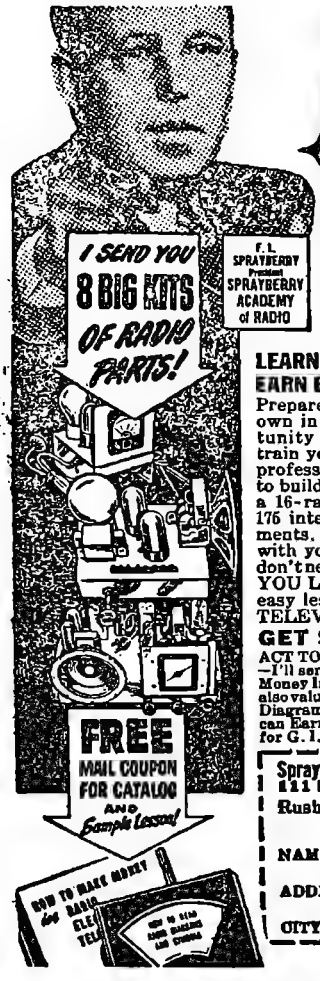
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FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES

Lawrence Cover Fine

Upon looking at my current issue of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, one of the first things I notice is the fine cover by Lawrence. The story it illustrates is good, too, in spots. Shiel has a bad habit of drawing his stories out a bit. Some places in the story were quite tiring, but on the whole a good story. The hero, travelling from place to place destroying cities was a good idea. I liked it.

The other story, "Mirror Maze" was mediocre, the old other-plan-of-existence plot. Maybe I just don't appreciate good science-fiction or fantastic fiction, but I just don't like Taine or Paine; and Merritt is just "pretty good" in my books. I devour all the science and fantastic fiction I can get a hold of, with a collection of little more than a year (I have been reading S.T.F. for about two years but it took a long time to convince my mother it was worth saving) and I don't have nearly all the fiction printed. Yet I have sixteen dollars worth of the stuff! Amazing, (Whoops, a little slip.) Strange, isn't it?

I am a 15 year old fan, and strangely enough I do not ask for correspondence. Why? Because I feel I have not been reading science and fantastic fiction long enough to acquire a definite ability to discuss and criticize it.

Keep the good fiction coming,
C. JOHN WEZEMAN.

6240 Patterson Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

The Stories Are Good

Shame on you for printing such lousy covers and shame on Lawrence and Finlay for drawing them. Judging by your last few issues you should change your name to *Cover Girl Revue*.

However, your stories have been good and I guess that's what counts. London's novel in the February issue was okay, but as for "Angel Island"! Phew! The April copy was considerably better. As for June, I have read only half of the lead novel but it seems to be the same old world destruction rot.

I wonder if any other readers have noticed how many stories have illustrations of slightly clad women sitting by streams.

Still an old faithful,
ROY HALE.

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(Continued from page 118)

she returned it would be in company with the white-haired 'god'—for that was how I was regarded by the Ktawrh. And from then forward Marah saw nothing clearly of the dwarfs until the last ceremony of presentation.

"The Undying One would not let me go until this year's floods had subsided and he had seen the new priestess accepted without suspicion. Yet even so, even in my madness, I must have had some spark of human feeling left, for it was I who prevailed upon the Undying One to alter the ceremony of presentation. Those five sacrifices were selected at haphazard, one by one, brought to the entrance of the hall—while Marah stood veiled on the opposite side—and taken swiftly away, so that she cannot have understood the full horror of it.

"It was I also who had ordered the dwarfs to wall up the entrance to the caves—perhaps from some vague impulse to prevent sacrifices altogether. Well, I had thought Marah's arrival had not aroused suspicion. The dwarfs must have conceived the germ of doubt then, however. Now that sacrifices were made without the usual ceremony of choice by the Unaging One, and those sacrifices, like my walling-up project, were unavailing to keep back the flood, their suspicions deepened.

"Finally, at the last presentation, when Marah unexpectedly, unveiled herself, Winslow saw she was not the Unaging One he had known before. Though how he could have distinguished between them after all those years, I must confess I do not understand."

"Perhaps I did not guess it by my eyes alone," put in the professor. "I believe Hope and Crayton often spoke in our cell about the substitution. It may be my mind took in what they were saying, without any of us realizing it."

"What was it that Winslow called out?" I queried.

"Simply," replied Jacob Starkenden, "that this was not the true priestess and that I, a stranger like himself, had conspired to deceive the Undying One and bring the race of dwarfs to disaster. In desperation I shot my last cartridge at Winslow, for to my insane mind it seemed that my only hope was to shut his mouth at once and make his death appear a blasting by the Undying One—in punishment for sacrilege.

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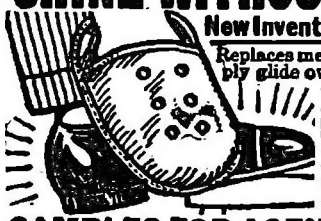

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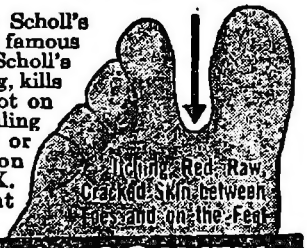

Dr Scholl's SOLVEX

"How that shot went wide you all saw. But it did more than put an end to that fiend. It freed those who had been subject to his evil personality and will. I have already told you, Crayton, there was more than occult chemistry to his devilish concoctions, but I can never hope to make you understand the amazing relief that rushed over me at the moment of his death. It was at that very moment, too, as you must all remember, that Marah recovered her right senses. And I thank God that what little she remembers of the time before is fast leaving her mind forever."

Jacob Starkenden leaned forward over the table, his face between his hands. Nothing was heard for several moments but the shrill pipe of a launch down in the bay.

"There will be much to help her forget," said Winslow at last, a queer twinkle in his eye. "Just at present I fancy her mind is occupied with happier things."

He looked up as he said this, and motioned us all to silence.

Gregory Hope and Marah Starkenden had appeared in the open French window. They had been out on a long verandah overlooking Yokohama Harbour, yet I do not think they had heard anything of the talk recounted above. Neither had we overheard them. Perhaps something of the sort had been in the back of their heads when they left the dining table and went out to study that singularly beautiful sunset view.

Gregory Hope was again very much the plump, fifth-formish figure he had presented when I met him in this port some months past, but with one marked change —that he now looked happy rather than happy-go-lucky. And in Marah Starkenden's clean-cut, proud features appeared no line to hint of the horrors amidst which she had lately moved. There was a light in her eyes, however; a wonderful light which I never remembered to have seen in time before.

The pair advanced towards Esau Starkenden hand in hand, and the girl laid her other white hand on his unruly mop of golden hair.

"What do you want, child?" he said quietly, without looking up.

"A blessing," she replied. "A double-barrelled one!"

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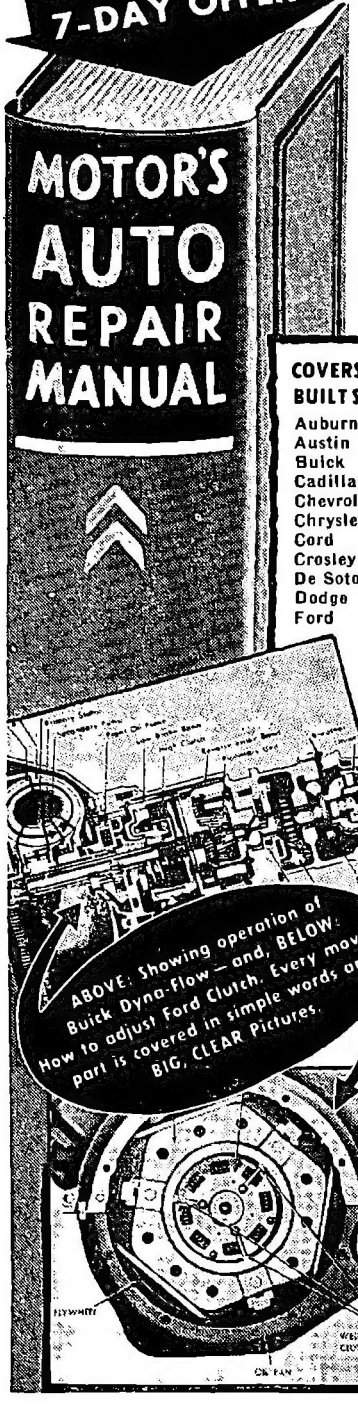

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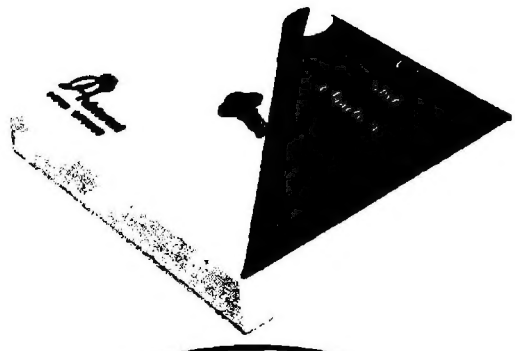

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